PENNY NICHOLS

FINDS A CLUE

JOAN CLARK

Penny Nichols Finds a Clue

By Joan Clark

Penelope Nichols is the daughter of a detective. Naturally of a fearless and inquiring disposition, she manages to stir up plenty of excitement as well as to help her father solve an important case. The second book in this PENNY NICHOLS series, PENNY NICHOLS AND THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING KEY (publication date Sept., 1936) finds the lovable, impulsive Penny on the trail of another adventure at Raven Ridge.

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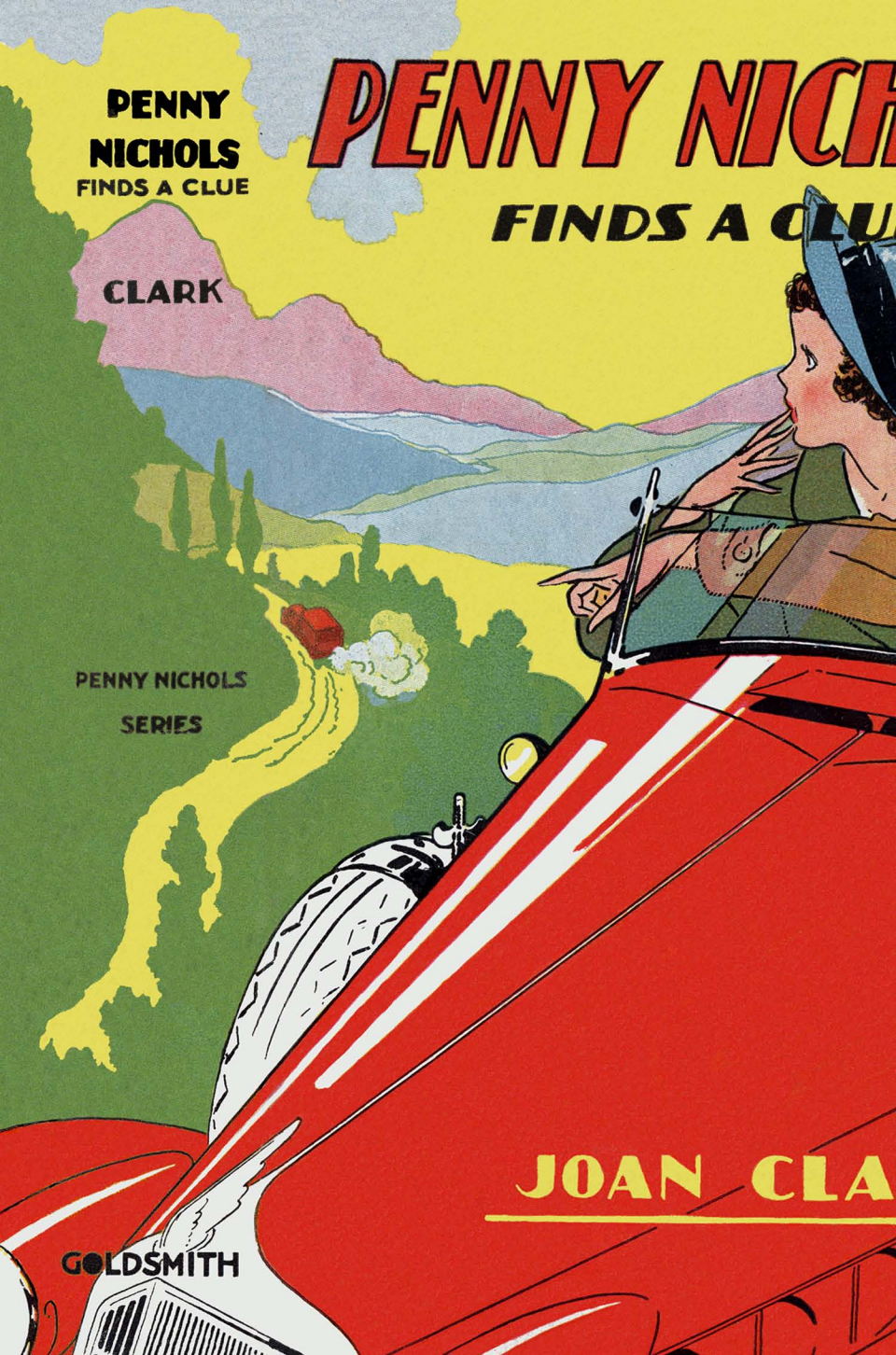
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JOAN CLARK

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Penny Nichols Finds a Clue

CHAPTER I

A Warning

PENNY NICHOLS flung open the office door of the Nichols Detective Agency, descending upon a dignified, gray-haired man who was busy at his desk.

"Dad," she announced, "I've come to report a mysterious disappearance!"

Christopher Nichols dropped the correspondence upon which he was working and regarded his daughter for a moment, his gray eyes flashing an indulgent welcome.

"What sort of disappearance?" he inquired cautiously.

Penny laughed as she opened her purse, disclosing an empty coin container.

"It seems to be my allowance again. Yesterday I had two dollars. Now the old pocketbook is as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard!"

Mr. Nichols' chief interest in life centered about his charming young daughter and he found it hard at times to keep from pampering her. It was especially difficult at this very moment as Penny stood there, her blue eyes twinkling mischievously, her full red lips parted in an enticing smile, and a few unruly ringlets of curly golden hair framing her forehead in an artistry both casual and becoming.

"Now that is a most bewildering case," he agreed with mock seriousness. "I don't suppose that rattletrap roadster of yours might offer a clue to the mystery?"

"I'm afraid it does," Penny admitted. "Only this time I indulged in seat covers instead of spare parts. As a result I'm flat broke. And I'm to meet Susan Altman at the tennis courts in ten minutes."

Mr. Nichols smiled indulgently as he reached into his pocket for a roll of bills.

"I'll come to the rescue this time, young lady, but mind, I'm charging it up to next week's allowance."

"That's fair enough." Carelessly, Penny picked

up several papers from the desk, studying them curiously. "What's this? A new case?"

Her father nodded as he quickly retrieved the documents.

"I've been hired by the Reliance Insurance Company to track down a gang of auto thieves."

"Sounds interesting."

"Unless I miss my guess it will prove a baffling case. I am afraid we may have to postpone our vacation trip to the mountains, Penny."

"Can't you arrange to capture the bold, bad men a little ahead of schedule?" Penny bantered.

"I wish it would prove as simple as that."

"It seems a shame to give up the vacation, because you've worked so hard lately. You really need a long rest."

"We'll both take it when this case is solved," Mr. Nichols promised. "Run along now, for I'm particularly busy."

Not in the least offended by the abrupt dismissal, Penny blew her father an impudent kiss as she went out the door.

Since the death of Mrs. Nichols many years be-

fore, Penelope and her father had lived together in a large white house on Hilburn Street with only Mrs. Gallup, an elderly housekeeper, to see that the establishment ran smoothly. It was not surprising that under such an arrangement the fifteen-year-old girl enjoyed rare freedom. Yet Penny never abused her privileges and she enjoyed the complete confidence of her father.

Penny owned her own roadster and drove it well. To be sure, the car was a second-hand model, but one of which she was very proud, for she had paid for it herself by teaching swimming at the Y.W.C.A. Automobiles, Penny discovered to her chagrin, had an unpleasant way of breaking down at odd moments, and for that reason her expense account usually was far ahead of her allowance. Occasionally, Mr. Nichols came to her rescue with very acceptable gifts of tires and spare parts.

Reaching the tennis court, Penny parked her car on a near-by street. She found Susan Altman, her chum, already awaiting her.

"It's almost too hot today for tennis," the dark-haired girl complained as she took her position

at the baseline of the cement court, preparing to serve the first ball.

For two long hours the girls battled back and forth. Although usually they were well matched, upon this particular day Susan found herself unable to cope with her companion's sizzling service and well-placed drives. Finally, after completely missing a ball which Penny had sent over the net with bullet-like speed, she threw down her racquet in disgust.

"I've had enough punishment! That makes the third straight set you've won."

"It's getting almost too dark to see the ball," Penny said generously. "Shall we call it an evening and finish off with something to eat?"

They crossed over to Eby's Café, a favorite haunt of Belton City's younger set. The booths were quite deserted.

"Everyone seems to have gone away for the summer," Susan mourned as she pondered over the menu. "I suppose you'll be leaving soon too, Penny."

"No chance of it, I'm afraid. Dad has become

involved in a new case which may keep us in town indefinitely."

"I wish my father were a detective," Susan commented a trifle enviously. "It's too bad about the vacation of course, but your life is exciting at least."

It seemed to her that Penny always led an unhampered, adventurous existence. At any rate, the girl was well acquainted with interesting happenings at the Belton City police court and had more than a nodding acquaintance with fascinating personages of the city.

"I've never had any real adventures," Penny declared gloomily. "Unfortunately, Dad is a little secretive about his sleuthing activities. I'd give anything to know about this latest case——"

Her voice trailed off for the two girls had heard a shrill warning whistle which they instantly recognized as the fire siren. Although they had not even begun their suppers they rushed to the plate-glass window to watch the red engine clatter by.

"Why, it's turning down our street!" Susan exclaimed. "Oh, I hope our house isn't afire!"

"Let's jump in my car and follow," Penny proposed.

They hurriedly left the café. Penny had parked her roadster just out of sight around the corner. But as they viewed the car, they both stopped short in amazement.

"The rear wheel is gone!" Susan gasped. "Surely that can't be your roadster, Penny!"

It had grown quite dark outside and for an instant both girls believed they had made a mistake in identifying the car. Yet one glance at the license number assured them that they had made no error. A daring thief had jacked up the rear axle, stealing an almost new wheel which Penny's father had purchased for her only the previous week. An inspection disclosed that the spare wheel also had been taken.

"I never heard of such an outrage!" Penny stormed. "Why, we couldn't have been in that café fifteen minutes! The theft was accomplished almost under our eyes!"

"I hope the loss is covered by insurance," Susan said anxiously.

"I don't know whether it is or not. Dad looks after everything like that. Oh, dear, unless I can get in touch with him, we're practically stranded here."

Although the girls were only a short distance from Mr. Nichols' office they were nearly a mile from their homes. The roadster had been parked several blocks from a street car line.

"We won't be able to learn about the fire either," Susan worried. "I wonder if it could have been at our house?"

"It isn't likely, but let's telephone and make certain."

Even as she spoke they heard the fire engine returning from its recent run.

"It couldn't have been much of a fire," Susan commented in relief. "At least it's out now."

"I'll see if I can get in touch with Dad," Penny offered.

She was relieved to find Mr. Nichols still at his office. After listening to an excited account of all that had befallen, he promised to come over immediately and take charge of the stripped roadster.

Ten minutes later he drove up in his sedan.

"This isn't as unfortunate as it appears," he told the downcast Penny. "The loss is completely covered by insurance. Besides, I have a dark suspicion that this little job was handled by the same gang of men I am after. I may glean a few valuable clues."

After making a brief inspection of the car Mr. Nichols turned his own sedan over to Penny, directing her to take it home while he attended to the stripped roadster and reported to the police.

Susan had promised to spend the night at the Nichols home, so the girls drove directly toward the house on Hilburn Street. Despite Mr. Nichols' matter-of-fact attitude regarding the theft, they considered it an event of major importance. They were so absorbed in an animated discussion of the affair that they were taken completely by surprise when a policeman held up his hand for Penny to stop.

"Now what have I done?" she murmured in alarm, bringing the sedan to a sudden halt at the curbing. "I hope I haven't crashed a light."

The officer stepped up to the car window.

"Aren't you Miss Nichols?" he questioned.

"Why, yes, I am." Penny was slightly relieved at his tone.

"I recognized your car and knew you lived in the neighborhood. I thought I'd give you a friendly warning."

"A warning? I don't understand."

"We're on the lookout for a crook who vanished somewhere in this vicinity," the officer explained. "In fact, he ran through the hedge which borders your place."

"Did you search the grounds?" Penny asked with interest.

"Yes, but he made his get-away. I just thought I'd tip you off to be careful."

"We'll be on the lookout," Penny promised. "Thanks for telling us."

The officer moved aside and she drove on again.

"I've had almost enough excitement for one evening without encountering a desperado," Susan declared with a little shiver as they ap-

proached the Nichols residence. "I wonder why they're after the man?"

"He's probably a jail breaker," Penny returned carelessly.

Susan studied her chum admiringly.

"You're the most casual person I ever knew, Penelope Nichols. Didn't that warning give you the creeps?"

"To tell you the truth I didn't think much about it. The man would be miles from here by this time."

Nevertheless, as she turned the car into the gravel driveway, Penny's keen gaze swept the dark grounds.

Susan likewise surveyed the yard anxiously. Suddenly she uttered a low cry, nervously clutching her companion's arm.

"I saw a shadow just then!" she whispered tensely. "I do believe someone is hiding in the lilac bushes!"

CHAPTER II

Inside the Trunk

PENNY instantly halted the car on the driveway, peering in the direction which her chum indicated.

"I don't see anyone," she insisted. "Perhaps the shadow you saw was caused by that big tree."

She pointed to a large oak which shaded the rear porch of the Nichols' home. Its swaying boughs did produce grotesque silhouettes upon the path near the lilac bushes.

"You may be right," Susan admitted reluctantly. "Only I was almost positive I saw someone."

"I think your nerves are a tiny bit on edge tonight," Penny laughed. Even so she was not quite sure Susan was mistaken.

She drove the sedan into the dark garage. As she was preparing to close the heavy double doors she thought she heard a step on the gravel path.

"Is that you, Mrs. Gallup?" she called.

There was no answer.

"I *was* right," Susan whispered tensely. "Someone is prowling about the grounds."

"There's no one about," Penny maintained after peering carefully around. "Probably I imagined that I heard footsteps. Come on, let's go to the house."

It was reassuring to see a light burning in the kitchen. The window shades had not been drawn and from the outside, Mrs. Gallup could be observed washing dishes. As the girls came in she greeted them in obvious relief.

"I'm so glad you're back, Penny. I was beginning to be afraid that something had happened to you."

"Quite a bit did happen," Penny laughed. "By the way, you haven't seen anyone prowling about the yard this evening, have you?"

"Why, no, I've been so busy that I've scarcely glanced out the window. Early this afternoon a tramp stopped at the door for food. After I gave him a sandwich he went off. I hope he hasn't come back to make trouble."

"Oh, no," Penny assured her quickly, "I'm sure there's no need for alarm."

"Then why did you ask?"

Penny was forced to relate what the policeman had told her, although she realized that the warning would worry the housekeeper.

"Dear me, I don't feel safe with your father gone. To think that so much has been going on around here and I didn't know a thing about it! Why, I haven't even locked the doors!"

"I doubt that it will be necessary now," Penny said, peering into the refrigerator to see what she could find for a belated supper. "Dad will soon be home anyway."

"I'm going to lock all the doors and windows this minute," Mrs. Gallup insisted firmly. "With so much silverware in the house, it isn't wise to take any chance."

Lowering the window blinds in the dining room, the housekeeper went directly to the buffet, removing a quantity of choice silverware which had been in the Nichols family for several generations. Leaving the girls to forage their own supper,

she carried the box upstairs, intending to lock it in her own bureau drawer. Returning again to the lower floor she scurried about closing doors and slamming down windows.

"Since she's bent upon doing such a thorough job, I suppose I should help," Penny remarked to her chum. "Finish your supper while I lock the back door."

"Don't forget to set out the milk bottle before you barricade us in," Susan laughed.

Penny picked the bottle up from the kitchen table and crossed the porch to place it on the step. It took her so long outside that Susan came to the door to learn what detained her. She was astonished to behold Penny standing as rigid as a statue, her eyes riveted upon the garage door.

"What's wrong?" Susan inquired.

"Didn't I close that door when I put the car away?" Penny demanded in a low tone.

"Why, yes, I'm sure you did. The wind must have blown it open."

Penny shook her head.

"The door has a special catch so I know it

couldn't have opened by itself. Susan, I believe someone has sneaked into the garage since we left it!"

Susan's eyes dilated with fear. Involuntarily, she took a step backwards, turning toward the kitchen door.

Penny caught her by the hand.

"Don't tell Mrs. Gallup or she'll go into hysterics. Let's find out if there really is anyone in the garage before we call the police."

At first Susan hung back, but when she found that Penny was determined to investigate the garage alone, she reluctantly followed her chum down the path.

Cautiously, they peeped into the garage. It appeared to be deserted.

"I'll get Dad's flashlight from the sedan pocket," Penny whispered.

She tiptoed across the cement floor. Groping about inside the car she found the light, but before she could turn it on she was startled to hear a slight sound overhead.

Penny's heart began to beat a trifle faster. She

was almost certain that someone was hiding in the little room above the garage. In former years it had been occupied by a chauffeur whom Mr. Nichols employed, but now that the detective drove his own car it was used only for the storage of a few old boxes and trunks.

"Don't you dare go up there!" Susan whispered tensely, sensing the thought in her chum's mind. "It isn't safe."

"It's safe enough if you stand guard here at the door," Penny insisted. "If anything goes wrong scream for Mrs. Gallup."

Before Susan could stop her she tiptoed across the cement floor and quietly crept up the stairway leading to the storage room.

Reaching the top step Penny paused to listen. She could hear no unusual sound, yet a certain intuition warned her that someone was in the room.

Systematically, she flashed the beam of her light over the walls. Nothing appeared amiss.

"My imagination is running riot tonight," she thought in disgust. "There's no one here."

She started toward the stairway, but paused, unable to rid herself of the conviction that all was not as it should be. Then her light chanced to focus for an instant upon an old trunk in one corner of the room. Beside it in a crumpled heap lay an old rug.

From her father Penny had learned to be an unusually keen observer. She was positive that upon her last visit to the storeroom, the carpet had covered the trunk, protecting it from dust.

Summoning her courage, she cautiously approached the trunk. She paused to listen again. Distinctly, she could hear the sound of soft breathing.

Suddenly she flung back the lid. A man cowered inside.

"Don't make a move," Penny warned coolly, blinding him with the light. Protected as she was by the darkness, he could not know that she had no weapon.

"Don't shoot!" he pleaded, stepping from the trunk with hands held above his head.

It was then that Penny observed that her

prisoner was a mere boy. He did not appear to be more than a year or two older than herself.

"March down the stairs in front of me and don't try any tricks," she ordered, trying to keep her voice steady.

She had grown a little frightened at her own daring. It appeared reasonable to suppose that the youth she had captured was the same crook whom the police had warned her against and yet the boy seemed too young to be a hardened criminal.

Penny decided upon a bold move.

"Susan, stand guard at the outside door," she directed.

As her chum took the position, Penny reached up and switched on the garage light.

"I have no weapon," she admitted, knowing that the youth had perceived the fact instantly. "But it will do you no good to try to escape for the police are combing the neighborhood."

Her words had the desired effect. Blinking in the unexpected glare of the light, the young fugitive shrank back against the wall, his face twisted by fear.

"Do they suspect I'm here?" he questioned. "Have they surrounded the district?"

"I talked with an officer only a few minutes ago," Penny answered truthfully. "He advised me that our property was being watched."

She was studying the boy with increasing interest. He was exceedingly well dressed and while his garments were in need of pressing they fitted him perfectly, disclosing a fine physique. He had broad shoulders and powerful muscles. It struck Penny that he looked more like a football player than a crook. Yet, as she studied his face, she realized that it lacked character.

"Don't turn me over to the police," the boy begged. "I've done nothing wrong."

"Then why were you hiding in my garage?"

"It's true the police were chasing me," he admitted reluctantly, "but they mistook me for someone else."

"If you weren't guilty why did you run?" Penny demanded suspiciously. "Why didn't you wait and explain?"

"You can't explain to a cop," the boy told her

with a scornful curl of his lip. "You see, I have a juvenile court record—it doesn't amount to much but the police won't give me a chance. I've been trying to go straight, but every move I make they watch me."

"Tell me your name."

The boy hesitated, then said quietly:

"Jerry Barrows."

"I mean your real name," Penny smiled.

A telltale flush crept over the youth's face, but he threw back his head a trifle defiantly.

"It is my real name. I'm no thief either. I admit I've been in a little trouble before this, but today it wasn't my fault. Another fellow and myself were standing in a crowd when an old lady let out a holler that someone had picked her pocketbook. The police came running. They spotted me right off. I hadn't been near the old lady, but she was so excited she was ready to identify anyone. When the cops tried to arrest me on suspicion I took to my heels."

"What sort of juvenile court record do you have?" Penny asked.

"Nothing of consequence. Once I was in a gang that took some apples from a pushcart. It was done in fun, but the judge put me on probation on account of it."

Penny occasionally had visited juvenile court sessions and in many respects the stories she had heard there corresponded to Jerry Barrows' account of his difficulties. Yet in some ways his tale did not ring true. Obviously, he was trying to convey the impression that he had never had a chance and yet he wore expensive clothing. She suspected too that he had been educated in a school fully as good as the one she attended.

"I am sorry, but I must turn you over to the police," she told him. "I don't believe your story. It doesn't hang together."

A strange change came over the boy's face. The last trace of arrogance left him as he turned pleading eyes upon the two girls.

"I lied about my name," he admitted, "but I did it because I want to protect my mother. If she learns that I am in trouble again it will kill her. Please, won't you let me go free?"

Even as the boy spoke, his eyes were roving to the door. It would not be difficult for him to overpower the two girls and escape if he really chose.

"If I should let you go will you promise not to get into any more trouble?" Penny asked suddenly.

The boy nodded.

"I'll find a job and keep straight."

"Would you really work if you had a position?" Penny questioned.

"Would I? Just try me!"

"Then I'm going to turn you loose," she decided. "Come to my father's office tomorrow at nine o'clock. I'll ask him to help you find a position."

"Where is his office?" the boy inquired.

"In room 305 of the Leader building. You'll see his name on the door. Christopher Nichols."

"Nichols, the detective?" the boy questioned uneasily.

"Yes, but you needn't be afraid he'll turn you over to the police. Wait now, and I'll see if the coast is clear."

Opening the garage door a tiny crack, Penny

peered out. As she had expected there were no officers lingering about the neighborhood.

"It's safe to leave," she informed.

He started away, then paused and offered his hand to Penny.

"Thanks for giving me a break," he told her gratefully. "I really meant what I said about going straight."

With that he darted through the open door and was lost in the night.

CHAPTER III

An Impulsive Act

"I DON'T know why I let him escape," Penny said self-accusingly as she closed the garage doors. "I simply did it on the impulse of the moment."

"One couldn't help liking the boy," Susan declared optimistically. "Do you suppose he'll keep his promise and come to see your father?"

"If he doesn't I'll know I made a silly mistake. I hope they can't put me in jail for permitting criminals to escape!"

"You might look very well in stripes," Susan teased. "They would never become me because I'm too plump."

Penny was in no mood to respond to the attempted banter.

"I wonder what Dad will say when he learns about it," she mused uncomfortably.

She did not have long to speculate for as the

girls turned toward the house Mr. Nichols came down the walk.

"I can't get in at the front door," he complained good naturedly. "Has Mrs. Gallup locked up the place for the summer?"

Penny explained what had happened but as she repeated Jerry Barrows' story it sounded flat and a trifle ridiculous. She was not surprised that her father listened incredulously.

"Why were the police searching for the boy?" he questioned.

"I didn't learn," Penny confessed. "I have only the boy's word."

"And yet you expect me to find him a job?" Mr. Nichols demanded gruffly. "If he ever shows up—which he won't—I'll turn him over to the authorities."

"Oh, Dad, you wouldn't, not after I gave my promise that you'd help him!"

"Why should I assist you in thwarting justice?" Mr. Nichols questioned severely. Penny could not see that his eyes were twinkling. "Are you trying to ruin my reputation as a detective?"

"I didn't mean to do anything that might embarrass you, only I couldn't bear the thought of turning the boy over to the police. He was so young."

"I was only teasing," Mr. Nichols told her kindly. "If the boy does come to my office I'll have a talk with him."

"But you don't really think he'll come?"

"I have no way of knowing, Penny. I must admit I'll be rather surprised if he appears."

Penny relapsed into moody silence as she walked toward the house with Mr. Nichols and her chum. She had begun to regret her hasty action.

"I left your roadster at a downtown garage," Mr. Nichols commented, switching to a different subject. "I notified the police that the wheels had been stolen but I did not have time to see the insurance company. I can attend to it in the morning unless you care to do it yourself."

"I may as well," Penny agreed listlessly.

She was feeling very gloomy indeed. Although her father had refrained from blaming her, she knew that he was amused if not annoyed at her

behavior. Above all else, she coveted his admiration.

"Cheer up," he said lightly as the three entered the house. "What if you did make a slight blunder? All detectives must learn by experience."

"A fine detective I'd make!" Penny sniffed. "I fail at the very first test. I'm just soft hearted I guess."

"Part of the blame should fall on me," Susan declared. "Jerry Barrows didn't seem in the least like a criminal, Mr. Nichols. I was impressed with his story too."

"I feel sure he must have been a very persuasive talker," the detective smiled. "However, I don't consider that either of you committed any great crime in permitting the boy to escape so I shouldn't worry about it now that the deed is done."

Mr. Nichols regarded the incident as closed, but Mrs. Gallup had heard enough of the conversation to surmise a little of what had happened. In response to her questions, the girls were forced to relate the entire story.

"Penelope Nichols, I never thought you'd do such a silly, foolhardy thing!" the housekeeper said severely. She felt it her privilege to be outspoken for she regarded the girl almost as a daughter. "Why, that young criminal might have killed you! And to think you let him get away without even making an effort to call the police!"

"I'm sorry about it now, Mrs. Gallup, but I thought I was acting for the best. Please, let's not talk about it any more this evening."

The subject had grown very painful to both Susan and Penny. They interested themselves in backgammon and as soon as they could do so gracefully, went to their bedroom.

"I'll never hear the last of it unless that boy shows up at father's office tomorrow," Penny groaned as she tumbled into bed. "I feel positively ill over the affair."

At breakfast the next morning she was her usual cheerful self. She even dared to hope that Jerry Barrows would keep his promise.

"You'll be at your office all morning, won't you, Dad?" she questioned anxiously.

"All morning," he repeated, smiling quizzically at her over his newspaper. "If your young friend calls upon me I'll telephone you."

Directly after breakfast Susan insisted that she must return home as her mother would be expecting her.

"I'll walk along with you," Penny offered. "I promised Father I'd stop at the insurance office this morning."

At the Altman residence the girls parted. Penny continued downtown alone. Mr. Nichols had furnished her with the address of the Reliance Insurance Company and she experienced no difficulty in locating the office.

After stating her mission she was ushered immediately into the presence of a portly gentleman who adjusted insurance claims. She was not surprised to learn that her name already was known to him.

"So you are Christopher Nichols' daughter?" the man remarked with interest. "We think very highly of your father here. In fact, his work has so impressed us that we have engaged him to assist

us in stamping out this gang of auto accessory thieves. But of course you already know that."

"My father did mention something about it," Penny murmured.

"Of late the gang has been extending its activities," the adjuster went on, warming to his subject. "Why, last night alone, over thirty thefts of car wheels were reported to the police."

"Thirty!" Penny gasped. "And I imagined I was the only one to have such bad luck."

"Quite the contrary. You merely chanced to be one of the victims of a systematic combing of the city. Nearly all of the wheels were taken in a relatively small downtown area. Now, in all probability there will be a lull in the activities for a few weeks. Then the gang will make another large haul."

"But when the wheels are taken in such numbers I should think it would be easy to trace them," Penny ventured.

The adjuster shook his head.

"For the most part the wheels are trucked to other cities for disposal. The serial numbers are

altered and the stolen goods is sold and distributed to dishonest dealers almost before the authorities are aware of the thefts. The police have been unable to cope with the situation." The adjuster smiled broadly, adding: "Now that your father is on the case, we're expecting a little action."

"I'm sure he'll provide it," Penny declared loyally.

The adjuster reached for a form book, and after asking a few routine questions concerning the stolen wheels, wrote out an order which permitted her to have them replaced free of charge at the garage where her roadster had been towed. Penny thanked him for the prompt service and left the office.

Since she was eager to have her car in operating condition with the least possible delay, she carried the order directly to the Hamilton garage. A courteous attendant promised that he would have the roadster equipped and ready for the road within a few minutes.

"You'll need a new standard for the spare too," he advised as she stood viewing the crippled car.

"When the wheel was stolen, the thief didn't bother to take it off. Instead he cut the standard with some sharp instrument. Probably with a little hand power saw."

"Isn't that a new method?" Penny inquired with interest, walking around the car to view the severed pieces of metal.

"We're getting quite a few cars in here that way," the attendant returned as he unbolted the ruined tire standard and tossed it into a corner.

While the man fastened a new wheel upon the rack, Penny went over and curiously picked up the discarded scraps of metal. She noted the jagged marks which the saw had left.

"I wonder if Dad might not make use of this," she thought. "I'll take it along anyway."

Somewhat to the amusement of the garage man, she carefully placed the pieces of steel in the rear compartment of the car.

Penny had heard her father remark that many times it was possible to trace a crook by the tools he used. Once Mr. Nichols had apprehended a kidnapper by means of a ransom note which had

been written upon a typewriter with a characteristic imprint. Penny hoped that the scraps of metal might upon scientific analysis disclose the type of instrument which had been employed by the thief to sever the tire standard.

"I'll drive directly to Dad's office and see if he can make use of any of these old pieces," she decided.

Although the errand provided an excellent excuse, the real purpose of her call was to learn if Jerry Barrows had kept his appointment.

Mr. Nichols was busy in the inner office when Penny arrived, but Miss Arrow, the efficient secretary, told her that she might go in. She found the detective engrossed in studying a group of photographs and their accompanying Bertillon records.

"Trying to brush up on who's out and why?" Penny asked banteringly.

Mr. Nichols nodded as he offered a photograph for her inspection.

"This is one of the men who I think may be involved in the automobile accessory thefts."

"Not a very pretty face," Penny commented.

"No, and 'Rap' Molberg hasn't a very pretty record either. He's served several terms in the pen, though usually he's a little too smart to have anything proven against him. Rap is the ringleader of the well known Molberg gang. It begins to look as if the outfit had extended its activities to Belton City."

"Is this Rap's description?" Penny inquired, indicating the Bertillon record which lay upon the desk. It consisted of a bewildering array of figures.

1.67.6	1.74.0	88.1	19.0	14.5
HGT	OA	TR	HL	HW

"Can you decipher it?" Mr. Nichols smiled.

"I know the HGT stands for height and TR for trunk, but what are the other abbreviations?"

"OA means outer arm," the detective explained. "HL represents head length and HW indicates the head width. Of course all the measurements are reduced to meters, centimeters, and millimeters."

"It looks complicated."

"Not after you become accustomed to it. For instance, I can see at a glance that Rap Molberg is five feet and seven-eighths inches tall—or as it appears in Bertillon—one meter, sixty-seven centimeters and six millimeters."

"I don't believe I'll ever care to be a detective," Penny smiled. "It's too much like studying the multiplication table!"

"Crime detection is a scientific profession——" Mr. Nichols began, but Penny cut him short.

"Tell me, did Jerry Barrows come to interview you this morning?"

"No, and I very much fear we'll never see the young man. I made a point of looking up his juvenile court record and find he has none."

"Then he must have given me a false name."

"I suspect he did, Penny."

"I guess it was silly of me to trust him. I didn't exactly believe his story at the time, and yet he seemed like a rather decent sort too."

"I'd not worry about it any more," Mr. Nichols said kindly.

"I'm afraid I've just done another foolish thing

too," Penny declared. She then told him about the severed wheel rack.

"Why, I'd like to examine those pieces of metal," the detective said with interest. "What did you do with them?"

"They're in the roadster. I parked the car in front of the office."

"Then I'll just go down and get them," Mr. Nichols decided. "I should have inspected the car more carefully last night but I was in a hurry. Wait here and I'll be back in a minute."

During her father's absence, Penny amused herself by looking through some of the books on his desk. There were several weighty volumes devoted to criminology and law. She found them dull and turned with more interest to the photograph of Rap Molberg.

He had the appearance of a typical man from the underworld. His eyes were hard and glaring; there were sullen, cruel lines about his mouth. The only unusual mark of identification was a long jagged scar across his left cheek.

In the outside office, a telephone rang. Penny

heard Miss Arrow answer the call. Apparently, the secretary was unaware that Mr. Nichols had stepped from the office, for she said:

"Just a minute, please. I will connect you with him."

An instant later the telephone at Penny's elbow jangled.

She took the receiver from its hook intending to explain to the caller that Mr. Nichols had left the office. Before she could speak, a cold, precise masculine voice came to her over the wire.

"Just a little warning, Mr. Nichols!" the words clipped into her ear. "Lay off the Molberg gang or else——"

Penny heard a receiver click. The wire had gone dead.

CHAPTER IV

The Molberg Gang

PENNY signaled frantically for the operator's attention. It seemed minutes before the telephone girl responded mechanically:

"Number please."

"I was disconnected with my party," Penny informed tensely. "See if you can trace the call. It is very important."

"Just a minute please."

There was another long wait, then the telephone operator informed Penny that the call could not be traced. It had been made from a pay station.

Mr. Nichols entered the office just as Penny hung up the phone.

"Anything wrong?" he asked quickly, noticing the expression on her face.

Penny repeated the warning message.

"Well, it looks as if I'm on the right trail," Mr.

Nichols declared, not in the least disturbed. "I'd have preferred that the Molberg gang hadn't learned I was shadowing them, but such news travels fast through underground channels."

"I'm afraid some of those dreadful men may harm you," Penny said anxiously. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"I am always careful, my dear, but I refuse to go around wearing a bullet proof vest. This isn't the first warning telephone call I've received."

"I suppose not," Penny sighed. "But I should think that if the members of the Molberg gang know you have been assigned to the case, it would be hard to secure evidence against them."

"It won't be easy," the detective agreed. "However, I flatter myself that I have a few trained investigators whose activities will never be suspected."

"You mean they mingle with underworld characters and try to gain their confidence?"

"Yes, that's the usual plan. When I locate Rap Molberg I'll have him constantly shadowed."

"I've never seen many of your assistants around the office," Penny remarked.

"Naturally not," Mr. Nichols smiled. "If they came here to report, every crook in Belton City would be aware of it within an hour."

"Then how do you keep in touch with your men?" Penny asked curiously.

"There are a few secrets which I must keep to myself. Aren't you taking a rather sudden interest in my work, Penny?"

"Perhaps I am. Since my car wheels were stolen I feel personally concerned in the case. I wish I could do something to help."

Mr. Nichols became grave. "There is nothing you can do, Penny. The last thing in the world that I could wish would be to have you involved in the case. In fact I've been worried for fear——"

"For fear of what?" Penny demanded as her father checked himself.

"I've been afraid that the Molberg gang might attempt to strike at me through you. Until this case is finished you must be very careful."

"I'll be careful, although even for you I refuse

to go around wearing a bullet proof vest," Penny grinned, paraphrasing his previous words. "Anyway, it might be exciting to be kidnapped."

"If you talk like that I see I must assign someone to keep watch over you."

"It won't be necessary," Penny assured him hastily. "I promise to stop, look and listen before I make any rash moves."

As if to demonstrate, she tiptoed to the door, opened it cautiously, peered forth at Miss Arrow who was busy at her typewriter, and then with a casual "goodbye" flung over her shoulder, was gone.

The following week was an uneventful one in the Nichols household. As was usually the way when Mr. Nichols became involved in an important case, meals were served at odd hours and often the detective did not come home at all for lunch or dinner. Penny complained that she never saw her father. Certainly she heard very little concerning the work he was doing for the insurance company.

On a Wednesday afternoon she was in the back

yard washing her roadster with the garden hose when Susan Altman came running up to relate a bit of news.

"Penny, the most wonderful thing has happened!"

"What?"

"I'm to have a car for my birthday present!"

"Not really!"

"Yes, I am. I've been saving money for two years, but I never made much headway. Father always thought I was too young to have a car too until this summer."

"What made him change his mind?"

"Mother, I guess. You see she has to have the family car a great deal, but nothing would induce her to drive it herself. I'm to have the new automobile as my very own providing I take Mother wherever she wishes to go."

"That should be an easy condition to meet," Penny smiled. "What kind of car are you going to get?"

"I don't know yet. I thought perhaps you'd help me select it."

"I'd love to. After running this old bus for nearly three years I consider myself quite an authority on cars."

"I can buy any low priced model I wish," Susan went on enthusiastically. "What color shall I get?"

"One that doesn't show the dirt," Penny advised promptly as she coiled up the hose and put it away. "It seems to me that I spend half my time trying to keep this animal of mine presentable."

"I thought I might like blue," Susan ventured. "I don't suppose you'd have time to go with me now and look at a few models, would you?"

"Of course I'll go! Wait until I change into more presentable clothes."

Penny darted into the house, returning in a few minutes.

"Where are you going to buy your car?" she questioned.

"Father told me to go to the Brunner garage on Second Street."

"I'll drive you there in the roadster," Penny offered.

At the Brunner salesrooms a few minutes later the girls were greeted by the manager, George Brunner. He was a tall, thin man with sharp black eyes. When he spoke to his employees his manner was overbearing and haughty, but in the presence of the two girls he beamed and smiled and hung upon their words. He talked glibly as he piloted them from one shiny new car to another.

Presently Susan found herself hypnotized by a blue coupe. After Mr. Brunner had taken the girls a ride in a similar model, she whispered to Penny that she thought she would buy the car.

"Why don't you look around at a few other places first," Penny suggested. "You might make a better deal."

"I'm afraid to wait for fear Father will change his mind. Besides, this is exactly the type of car I like."

Penny refrained from saying more, but she was sorry that her chum seemed determined to make such a hasty transaction. For some reason she had taken an instant dislike to George Brunner. Susan, however, noticed nothing amiss in his manner and

listened spellbound as he talked glowingly of the little blue coupe.

"I think I'll take it," Susan decided hesitatingly. "Could I drive it away?"

"Certainly," the manager beamed, steering her gently toward the inner office. "Just step inside and we'll fill out the necessary papers."

Almost before she was fully aware of what she was doing, Susan had written a check in payment for the car and had signed the usual legal papers.

"Do you think I've made an awful mistake?" she asked Penny nervously while they sat waiting for the car to be serviced.

"It's a beautiful model, Susan. And if it operates even half as well as Mr. Brunner claimed, it should be a wonderful bargain."

"You didn't like that man very well, did you?"

"No," Penny responded shortly.

"The Brunner garage is supposed to be one of the best in Belton City."

"I know it is. I haven't a thing against Mr. Brunner except that I don't care for his manners."

The discussion ended for the manager had re-

turned to announce that the new car was ready to leave the garage.

"I am sure you will find it perfectly satisfactory, Miss Altman," he beamed. "But in the event that anything *should* go wrong don't hesitate to call upon us."

"I'll remember that," Susan said.

With Penny beside her to offer advice, she drove the coupé from the garage. Turning out into Second Street she narrowly missed being struck by a truck which was traveling at a high rate of speed.

"Better get out into the country until you've had an opportunity to become accustomed to handling the car," Penny suggested.

"That's a good idea," Susan agreed. "I don't want to wreck the thing before I drive it home."

After an hour of straight driving on a deserted road, she became quite dexterous at operating the gears. When she felt entirely confident of her ability to handle the car in any emergency, the girls drove back into the city. They parted at the Brunner garage where Penny had left her own roadster.

"Thanks for helping me select the car," Susan told her chum gratefully.

"I didn't have much to do with it," Penny smiled. "But it's a fine looking automobile. I wish I had one half as nice."

"I'll let you drive mine whenever you like," Susan offered generously.

When Penny reached home it was nearly dinner time. Mrs. Gallup was busy in the immaculate green and white kitchen, frosting an angel food cake.

"Any mail for me this afternoon?" Penny inquired, pausing to scrape up a generous spoonful of fudge from the frosting pan.

"I declare, I've been too busy all day to even think of the mail."

"I'll look."

Penny went to the box at the front door. There were three letters. Two for Mr. Nichols and one for herself. The latter was addressed in pencil on a cheap yellow envelope.

"Wonder who it's from?" she thought with interest.

Quickly, she ripped open the envelope, glancing at the signature which had been signed at the bottom of the brief note.

"Jerry Barrows!" she exclaimed.

Eagerly she read the message.

"Sorry I couldn't keep the appointment with Mr. Nichols," the boy had written. "Tell your father to be on guard. His life is in danger."

CHAPTER V

Penny Turns Sleuth

MR. NICHOLS did not have a great deal to say regarding the note which Penny read to him later that evening at the dinner table.

"Don't let it worry you," he advised. "Just put it away for future reference and forget about it."

"Future reference?"

"Yes, it's always wise to keep such communications. One never knows when a sample of handwriting might prove useful."

"I'm sure Jerry Barrows must have some good qualities or he'd never have sent the message. Don't you think so, Dad?"

"Perhaps. It's obvious the boy was afraid to talk with me."

"But why should he warn you that your life is in danger? Do you think he could know anything concerning the Molberg gang?"

"It isn't likely, but he may have some underworld connection."

"I'm getting more nervous every day," Penny declared. "I'll never feel very easy until all the members of that gang are captured."

"It may be a more difficult task than I at first believed," her father remarked, frowning. "I know that Rap Molberg is hiding somewhere in the city but so far none of my investigators have been able to trace him."

"Perhaps he's through causing trouble," Penny said hopefully.

"He'll make enough when the time comes."

"I've not heard of any automobile thefts or anything of the sort for several days."

"That's just it. Things have been altogether too quiet. It's like a lull before the storm. A bad sign."

Mr. Nichols abruptly left the table. He walked to the door, then came back.

"I must go downtown again this evening, Penny," he said regretfully. "I'll leave the telephone number of my new office in the event you

should need to reach me. It isn't listed in the 'phone book,' of course."

"Your new office?" Penny demanded. "What became of your old one, may I ask?"

"It's still there," Mr. Nichols smiled. "Miss Arrow has assumed charge, and I've taken up temporary quarters on the tenth floor of the Atler building."

"Isn't that almost directly across from the Brunner garage?"

"Yes, it's located in the downtown theater district. The bulk of the auto accessory thefts have taken place in this relatively small area. From the window of my new office I secure a bird's eye view of all that goes on in nearby streets."

"Surely you don't expect to catch the thieves in the act of stealing automobile wheels!" Penny marveled.

"It will be the surest way of gaining a conviction. If a professional crook isn't captured at the scene of his crime, he usually is clever enough to cover his tracks completely. An amateur is seldom so skillful in obliterating clues."

"May I visit this new office of yours?" Penny asked.

"Yes, if you use discretion and don't come too often. I have taken the office under an assumed name—John Bradford. I shouldn't care to have my real name known for awhile."

"I'll be very discreet if I come," Penny promised.

Her father turned to leave.

"It must be dull for you here alone at night," he said apologetically. "Why don't you take Susan to a picture show?"

"I think I'll do that," Penny agreed.

After Mr. Nichols had left the house, she telephoned Susan. Mrs. Altman answered the call, informing her that her daughter was spending the evening at the home of an aunt.

"I may as well go to the show alone," Penny decided.

One of her favorite movie stars was showing at a neighborhood theater only a few blocks from the Nichols home. Penny walked the short distance. She thoroughly enjoyed the picture, remaining to

see part of it twice. It was a little after nine o'clock when she left the theater.

Recalling that Mrs. Gallup had requested her to bring home a pint of ice cream, she crossed the street to the nearest drug store.

While she was waiting to be served, a man in grimy workman's clothes slouched into the store. He pretended to interest himself in a cigarette slot machine, but Penny noticed that he darted furtive glances at the waiting customers.

Something about the man's appearance struck Penny as peculiar. She conceded that he looked like a day laborer yet his actions and mannerisms were not in keeping.

"I've seen him before," she thought.

Suddenly the picture of Rap Molberg flashed into her mind. Yet as she scrutinized the man a second time she could see only a slight resemblance to the photo her father had shown her.

However, as the man moved swiftly to the nearest telephone booth, suspicion began to take root. In identifying underworld characters, photographs were never a certain guide, that Penny

knew. Too often a criminal disguised his appearance. Not by false wigs and beards which even a novice detective might note at a glance. Rather by altering his features or by adopting costumes commonly seen upon the street.

Impulsively, Penny stepped into a telephone booth adjoining the one which the workman had entered. By leaning close to the wooden panel, she could hear part of the conversation.

"That you, Jake?" he asked gruffly. "Everything's set for the big haul. We're all ready to go ahead whenever the boss gives the word."

By this time Penny was almost certain that she was listening to the voice of Rap Molberg. Although in general the man did not resemble the photo which she had seen, the color of his eyes and the expression of his mouth were identical. His build seemed to correspond to the figures of the Bertillon record.

A minute later the man slammed down the telephone receiver and left the booth. Penny waited until he was out of the store, then dropped a nickle in the slot. She called the number which her father

had given her. There was no response at the other end of the line.

"I suppose he's left the office," she thought frantically. "Oh, I can't let that man get away."

She rushed from the drug store and reached the street just in time to see the workman disappear around a corner.

"I wonder if I dare attempt to shadow him?" Penny debated.

She was a little afraid, yet the streets in the immediate vicinity of the theater were well lighted, and it did not seem too dangerous.

Turning the corner, she caught sight of the man far ahead. He was walking rapidly. She too quickened her step, but took care not to approach close enough to arouse his suspicion.

Presently the man paused beside a fine looking automobile which had been parked at the curbing. As he glanced sharply up and down the street, Penny pretended to be looking into the window of a jewelry store. Actually, she was watching the man's reflection in the glass.

She saw him step into the car, take a key from

his pocket and turn on the ignition. As he drove away, Penny quickly noted down the license number.

She glanced hopefully up the street but there was no policeman within sight. A taxicab driver noticing her agitated expression, cruised close to the curb. Penny hailed him.

"Follow that green car ahead," she directed tersely, climbing in. "Don't let it get out of your sight."

At the first corner they were held up by a light which was changing from caution yellow to red. Risking arrest, the taxi driver crashed it.

The green car ahead had picked up speed. It weaved in and out of traffic in a dangerous manner, driven by a man who was both skillful and reckless.

The pursuit led into the hilly, crooked streets upon which the older section of Belton City had been built. As they raced down first one narrow street and then another, turning corners at a breathless speed, Penny suspected that the man had become aware that he was being followed.

Her driver had increasing difficulty in keeping him in sight.

"The right hand turn!" Penny cried as the taximan hesitated at an intersection.

They tore down a dark, twisting street at a break-neck speed. Suddenly the driver slammed on his brakes. The thoroughfare had come to an abrupt end.

"It's a dead-end," the taximan said in disgust, turning the cab around. "He couldn't have come this way."

"I'm sure he did," Penny insisted.

The street was short and she could see its entire length. The green car had vanished.

There were no houses or garages into which the automobile might have turned. On either side of the street stood factory and manufacturing buildings.

"Shall I try another road?" the driver questioned.

"It's no use now. I guess we've lost him. But I was positive that man came this way. I don't see how I lost him."

She gave her home address to the driver, and sank back against the cushions, completely disgusted with the turn of events.

As Penny alighted at her own door, she cast a speculative glance toward the lighted window. If her father had not returned, Mrs. Gallup was almost certain to ask embarrassing questions concerning her arrival in a taxicab.

"And I forgot the ice cream too!" she thought. "I'll have a nice time explaining."

However, it was not necessary to give an account of her activities. Mrs. Gallup met her at the door.

"You came just in time, Penny. You're wanted on the telephone."

"It isn't Father?"

"No," the housekeeper assured her, "I think it's your chum."

"Susan?"

"Yes." Mrs. Gallup pushed her gently toward the telephone. "The girl seems to be greatly excited over something. Do hurry and answer for she's been waiting several minutes now."

CHAPTER VI

Susan's Misfortune

WHEN Penny answered the telephone she heard her chum's agitated voice.

"I know I shouldn't bother you so late in the evening," Susan began excitedly, "but I've had the worst luck with my new car!"

"You haven't been in a collision?"

"No, it isn't quite that bad. But I'm stranded on Eighth Avenue and I can't reach my folks by telephone."

"I'll drive over and get you," Penny offered. "What's the matter anyway? Has the engine balked already?"

"The car has been stripped by thieves! I'm so furious I can't even talk about it."

"I'll come right over and see for myself," Penny declared.

Pausing only long enough to tell Mrs. Gallup where she was going, Penny backed her roadster

from the garage. She located Susan not far from Eighth Avenue and Clark, sitting gloomily behind the wheel of her new coupé.

As Penny drove up she saw that the spare wheel was missing. A spotlight was gone and likewise a reflecting mirror.

"The thieves very obligingly left me the steering wheel," Susan greeted her friend. "When a person can't park fifteen minutes without having everything stolen, I think it's time for the police to get busy!"

"How did you happen to be parked downtown?" Penny inquired. "Your mother said you had gone to visit an aunt."

"I did, but on the way home I stopped at the "Y" for a swim. I should have left the car on a lot but I thought I'd save the quarter. Now witness the result!"

"You still have four tires," Penny pointed out. "That's more than they left me."

"Yes, but they've done something to the engine. It won't start. That's why I called you."

Penny lifted the hood to look at the motor.

Susan peered anxiously over her shoulder.

"Can you tell what's wrong?"

"It looks to me as if some of the vital parts are missing. Offhand I'd say it was the generator."

"What's a generator?" Susan asked blankly. "Are they very expensive?"

"I don't know but I imagine they are. Isn't your car covered by insurance, Susan?"

"No, it isn't. We intended to take it out but we didn't think a few days' delay would make any difference."

"Thieves seem to favor new cars."

"I realize that now," Susan said ruefully. "You know, I noticed a rather queer thing as I came out of the "Y." A garage service car was standing beside my coupé. It drove away as I came toward it."

"A service car?" Penny demanded alertly. "Did you see what garage it was from?"

"No, I didn't. In fact, I scarcely paid any attention at the time for it wasn't until I had reached my car that I realized it had been stripped."

"You must have surprised the thieves in the

act!" Penny said excitedly. "Undoubtedly, they are using the service truck as a front to escape detection."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, they drive up in the truck and pretend to be changing a tire or repairing the engine. Passersby notice nothing amiss."

"But what if the owner appears?"

"They drive away or if actually caught claim that they have made a mistake in identifying the car of a customer."

"The driver of the garage truck did act suspiciously," Susan admitted. "I was stupid not to jot down the license number."

The girls were talking so earnestly that they failed to note the approach of a policeman. He paused to see what was wrong.

"Wheel stolen?" he asked, surveying the car critically.

"The wheel, the generator, and almost everything detachable," Susan informed. "I was only gone a few minutes too."

"Have you reported to headquarters?"

Susan shook her head.

"What's the use?"

"You might recover your stolen property," the policeman said optimistically, taking a notebook from his pocket. "Your name and address?"

Susan gave it and furnished such information as she could regarding the theft.

"Your car wasn't the only one that was stripped in this neighborhood tonight," the officer told her. "Not fifteen minutes ago I ran into a similar case."

"I think it's time the police did something about it," Susan said somewhat crossly.

"We're up against a tough gang, Miss. Our force is small and we can't place a man on every street corner."

As the officer continued to make out his report, a girl came running toward the little group. She was about Penny's age, though much thinner. Her black hair blew in the wind, unrestrained by hat or béret.

"Oh, Father!" she cried in agitation.

The policeman turned quickly around.

"Why, Betty, what brings you here?" he questioned in surprise.

"I've been following you for two blocks," the girl said breathlessly. "I wanted to——"

Her voice trailed off. She had noticed Susan and Penny.

Slowly her eyes swept over the dismantled car, then they roved to her father with an expression which was akin to panic.

"What was it you wanted, Betty?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter now," she stammered. She added tensely: "Father, you're not making out a report!"

"Certainly, I am."

"Don't do it," the girl pleaded, gripping his arm. "You know what it may mean. Please, for my sake!"

Penny and Susan exchanged a quick glance. They were at a loss to understand the girl's strange attitude. Why should she be so troubled because her father was writing out a routine report of a theft?

To their relief, the policeman laughed care-

lessly and went on making out the report.

"You're hysterical, Betty," he accused. "Come, get a grip upon yourself."

"I'm sorry," the girl murmured, glancing nervously at Penny and Susan. "I shouldn't have made such a request."

"My daughter is very excitable," the officer said apologetically. "She didn't really mean what she said."

There was an awkward pause. Penny turned to the girl and questioned kindly:

"Haven't I seen you somewhere? Your face is familiar."

"I've watched you swim at the Y.W.C.A. pool. You dive beautifully too."

"Oh, I remember you now! But I don't know your name."

"I am Betty Davis. You've already met my father."

"Jerome Davis," the officer added. "Just a sidewalk pounder."

The girls smiled at the disparaging remark. Penny mentioned her own name.

"You're not related to Christopher Nichols?" the officer asked.

"Yes, I am his daughter."

"You don't say! Well, I *am* glad to make your acquaintance. Down at the station they think a lot of your father."

"He was on the force many years ago, I believe," Penny said politely.

"That was before my time, but I'm always hearing about him. He's solved some difficult cases that have baffled our best detectives."

Penny made a perfunctory response and the officer turned to his daughter.

"Betty, you shouldn't be out alone so late at night. You must go back home at once."

"If you live nearby I'll be glad to take you in my car," Penny offered.

"I shouldn't like to trouble you," the girl said hastily. "My home is only a few blocks away."

"It will be no trouble at all," Penny insisted, opening the door of her roadster. "Do let me give you a lift."

The girl flashed her father an appealing glance.

It was obvious to both Penny and Susan that she was greatly upset about something, yet the officer appeared not to notice. He did not seem to realize that she wished to speak with him privately.

"It's very kind of you to take my daughter home, Miss Nichols," he said quietly. "Don't keep them waiting, Betty."

Reluctantly, the girl crowded into the seat beside Penny and Susan.

"I live at 1406 St. Clair Avenue," she informed briefly.

As they drove slowly along, Penny had an opportunity to study the girl. She was an odd type. Serious and certainly not talkative. When drawn into conversation, her answers were given in monosyllables.

"She's worrying over something," Penny thought.

The car halted before a modest brown cottage on St. Clair Avenue. Betty Davis alighted.

"Thank you so much for bringing me home," she told Penny gratefully. She hesitated, then added earnestly: "I know you thought it queer

because I asked my father not to make that report."

"I'm sure you must have had a very good reason," Penny returned.

"I was overwrought or I shouldn't have made the request. You see, my father is in great danger!"

"I don't quite understand."

Already Betty Davis felt that she was revealing too much.

"I wish I could tell you about it—but I don't dare," she murmured.

With that she turned and ran into the house.

CHAPTER VII

An Awkward Situation

"NOW just what did she mean by that remark?" Susan demanded of her chum as they saw Betty Davis disappear inside the cottage.

"I'm not a mind reader," Penny returned with a shrug. "The air seems to be filled with mysteries this evening."

She then told of her experience in shadowing the man whom she had believed to be Rap Molberg. Susan listened in amazement.

"You must have lost your senses, Penny Nichols! If you turn up missing some morning, it will be easy to guess the reason why!"

"Perhaps it was a foolish thing to do. But I thought if I could learn Rap Molberg's hideout it would be a big help to Dad. Investigators from the agency have been searching days for that man."

"You should leave the job to them then," Susan advised severely.

"I guess I will," Penny said ruefully. "At any rate, I failed at it."

After dropping Susan off at the Altman residence, she drove on to her own home. Mr. Nichols was nervously pacing the living room floor when Penny entered.

"I'm glad you're here," he said in relief. "Mrs. Gallup told me you had gone off after receiving a telephone call. I was afraid it might have been a frame-up."

"I went to meet Susan. Didn't Mrs. Gallup explain?"

"No, but it doesn't matter now. I shouldn't have worried only things have been popping in the city tonight."

"The tire theft gang is at work again?"

"Yes, they made a big haul. When the story gets out, the Nichols Detective Agency isn't going to appear in a very good light."

"You haven't been working long on the case, Dad."

"True, but to date the result of our investigation has been disappointing. This haul tonight has all the earmarks of Rap Molberg's hand, yet my men can find no trace of him in the city."

Penny could not restrain her news an instant longer. She half expected that her father would scold her for the taxicab escapade, but to her surprise he became mildly excited.

"Can you give me an accurate description of the man, Penny?"

"He was about five and a half feet in height and wore workman's clothes."

"Undoubtedly, a disguise," the detective interposed.

"His eyes were dark. The expression of his mouth was sullen. His teeth were uneven."

"Did you notice a scar on his cheek?"

"No."

"The mark isn't really significant, for Rap Molberg would be clever enough to hide it. Did you observe anything more?"

"He seemed extremely nervous. And the telephone conversation made me suspicious. Oh, yes,

when he drove away I copied down the license number."

"Let me see it," Mr. Nichols said eagerly.

She handed it to him.

"Penny, you've done a fine piece of work," he praised.

"But I let him get away."

"You couldn't help that. This license number may make it possible for us to trace him. I'll telephone police headquarters right now and see if they know anything about the car."

He sought a telephone in an adjoining room. Penny lingered by his elbow while he made the call. After talking for some minutes, he hung up the receiver.

"I was afraid we might run into this, Penny. The license number which you noted down belongs to a stolen car."

"Then it won't be of any use to you."

"Probably not a great deal. But don't feel disappointed. It wasn't your fault that the man got away. He has eluded some very clever investigators."

"I had another queer experience when I went to meet Susan," Penny related. "Did you ever hear of a policeman by the name of Jerome Davis?"

"Yes, why?"

Briefly, Penny told of her meeting with the officer and his daughter.

"I can't comprehend why Betty tried to prevent her father from writing out a report of the theft, Dad. If such information leaked out it might cost him his position on the force."

"I can readily understand that," Mr. Nichols returned. "Jerome Davis is in a bad spot already."

"Just how do you mean?"

"In the first place, he has never stooped to play politics. Some of his superiors dislike him on that account, although until recently they never questioned his honesty."

"Has anything ever been proven against him?"

"No, but he has been subjected to severe criticism because so many auto accessory thefts have occurred in his district. The situation gives his enemies a fine opportunity to shoot at him."

"I suppose that explains why Betty didn't want him to report another theft. She was afraid it might cost him his job."

"That might be the reason."

"It won't be fair if they discharge him on account of something he can't prevent."

"Life isn't always fair, Penny."

"What do you think about Jerome Davis, Dad? Is it your opinion that he is honest?"

"Yes, I think he is." Mr. Nichols abruptly arose. "What you have told me is very interesting, Penny. I believe I'll call Davis to the house and have a talk with him. He should be off duty soon."

Telephoning the Davis home, the detective left a message that the policeman was to call back at his earliest convenience.

"It's too late to get him here tonight," Mr. Nichols remarked to his daughter. "If he does telephone I'll ask him to come to my office tomorrow."

"Then I won't hear what he has to say," Penny complained.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't anyway, my dear. Mr.

Davis would never talk freely if you were present at the interview."

"I suppose not—if he knew it. But I might hide in the closet."

"That would be a trifle too theatrical for my taste, Penny."

The doorbell rang sharply. Mrs. Gallup came from another room to answer it. A moment later she returned to the study where Mr. Nichols and Penny were sitting.

"Mr. Davis to see you," she told the detective.

"Davis? Strange he didn't telephone before coming at such a late hour. But of course I'll see him."

Reluctantly, Penny arose.

"I suppose I'll have to go."

"No, wait. You really want to hear the interview?"

"I most certainly do."

"You've earned the right," Mr. Nichols smiled. "Sit over there in the high-back wing chair."

Deftly he turned it so that the tall back faced the door. As Penny sat down he placed a book in her

hands and advised her to curl her feet up under her as she often did when she read. In such a position, she was completely screened from the gaze of the caller as he entered the room.

No sooner had Penny settled herself comfortably than Mrs. Gallup ushered the officer into the study. She then quietly withdrew.

"Have a chair," Mr. Nichols invited cordially. He offered one which would not reveal Penny's hiding place.

"My daughter told me you had telephoned," Jerome Davis began a trifle uneasily. "I thought I might as well walk on over and see you. I hope I didn't come too late."

"Not at all. I seldom retire before midnight. Davis, I suppose you wonder why I wanted to talk with you."

A grim look had come over the officer's face.

"I judge it's about the stolen wheel and generator. I met your daughter this evening."

"So she told me. However, what I really wanted to talk to you about was the Molberg gang."

The officer offered no response.

"I don't need to tell you that they are at the bottom of this recent outburst of thievery," the detective went on, eyeing his caller shrewdly. "Unless they're captured soon, you'll be in a bad spot, Davis."

"I'm in one now. I've always tried to be honest and do my duty as I saw it. Because of that I'll probably end up without a job."

"Not if you team along with me and help me to capture this gang. I'll say frankly that since I took this case for the insurance company, I haven't had much cooperation from the police."

"I'll be glad to help you all I can, Mr. Nichols. But I must act cautiously."

"You mean for fear of antagonizing your superiors?"

"Yes, that's the chief reason," Jerome Davis admitted hesitatingly.

"Have you another?" Mr. Nichols probed.

"It's this way," the officer informed, growing confidential. "The commissioner seems to think that I've sold out to Rap Molberg. At least he appears to suspect that I serve as a stool pigeon for

the gang, and tip them off as to the best time to pull a job. I've been demoted twice. A self-respecting man would have resigned long ago."

"Unless he wanted to prove the truth," Mr. Nichols suggested softly.

"That's it," the officer agreed. "I mean to hang on until I'm fired from the force. I've been unlucky because so many jobs have been pulled in my district. I'm working on the case when I'm off duty and one of these days I may get a break."

"You spoke of working cautiously. Are you afraid to have your superiors know what you are about?"

"Not exactly. You see, Mr. Nichols, lately I've been running down a few tips regarding the whereabouts of Rap Molberg. Some of his henchmen have given me a polite warning to mind my own affairs. Their threats have terrified my daughter, and my son, Jimmie."

"Then you don't feel that you can push the search?" the detective inquired pointedly.

"I intend to go on just as I have," Jerome Davis

maintained firmly. "I expect to do everything in my power to capture Rap Molberg!"

"Good!" Mr. Nichols exclaimed. "I am satisfied that you are the sort of man I can use. If you will work secretly with my investigators, I am confident we shall produce results."

"I'll be glad to cooperate in every way I can," the officer promised.

They shook hands to seal the agreement. Jerome Davis turned to leave.

"Thank you for coming here tonight," the detective said as he escorted the officer to the door. "You will receive instructions from me within a short while. A day or two at the latest."

After the door had closed behind the caller, Penny arose from her chair.

"Did you enjoy the interview?" her father asked, smiling.

"It was vastly exciting! I thought surely I'd be seen."

"Mr. Davis was too engrossed in our talk to be very observing."

"I don't wonder that Betty Davis worries about

her father. I heard him say that he had been threatened by the Molberg gang."

"Yes, Davis is in an awkward situation. However, he seems to be a man of courage. I can use him."

"I'll be glad when you're through with this case," Penny sighed. "I'm worried sick for fear something may happen to you. All these threats——"

"Forget them," Mr. Nichols advised. "I've received plenty of them before this and I'm still alive."

"But Rap Molberg——"

"Forget him too," the detective smiled. Unless you do, I'll be sorry I ever told you about the case. Run along to bed now—and pleasant dreams."

"Nightmares to you!" Penny retorted.

She slowly mounted the stairs and disappeared into her own room.

CHAPTER VIII

A Revealing Clue

FOR the next few days Penny saw very little of her father. He left the house early in the morning and often did not return at night until after she had retired. Meals became something of an ordeal, for either Mr. Nichols buried himself in a newspaper or allowed the conversation to lapse.

"You're as talkative as the sphinx!" Penny accused. "Is the case going badly?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Is it going well then?"

"Not especially."

"Have you found any clue as to the whereabouts of Rap Molberg?"

"Not yet."

"You're impossible!" Penny cried furiously. "It's no use trying to learn a thing from you unless you're in exactly the right mood!"

In desperation she sought solace in the companionship of her chum, Susan. They attended a great many moving picture shows and developed an enviable tan by swimming outdoors and playing tennis for hours at a time.

Although Penny was permitted complete freedom, Mr. Nichols had warned her to use caution whenever she left the house at night. On more than one occasion in going downtown or to the home of a friend, she half suspected that she was being followed.

She refrained from mentioning her fear to Mr. Nichols lest he curtail her freedom. But she became more alert and watchful.

One afternoon while Penny was mowing the yard, Susan drove up in her coupe. It was the first time she had used it since the unfortunate night of the theft. She hailed Penny joyously.

"The old bus is traveling again! It has a new generator and a fine new wheel!"

Penny inspected the new purchases.

"See anything wrong with the wheel?" Susan demanded.

"Not a thing. Why?"

"I bought it for about half the regular price. I was a little afraid I might have been gipped."

Penny examined the spare wheel more critically. "It looks exactly like the one Dad bought me some time ago for nine ninety-eight. In fact, I'd think it was the same tire—the one that was stolen from me—if I didn't know better."

"I only paid four dollars," Susan informed proudly. "Wasn't it a bargain?"

"It looks like it. Where did you buy the tire?"

"Oh, at a little place on South Lake Street. I don't remember the name."

"South Lake isn't such a good location," Penny said thoughtfully. "I've heard Father say that a great many disreputable firms operate there. I know once he traced stolen furniture to a dealer on that street."

"I hope I didn't buy a stolen wheel," Susan declared. "Was that what you had in mind, Penny?"

"I thought of it right off. But I haven't any reason for saying it. For all I know, your tire may be a legitimate bargain."

"I wish there was some way of finding out for certain," Susan said anxiously.

"Let's look for the serial number. The wheel should have one."

Penny moved closer to inspect the new purchase.

"The number is here all right," she acknowledged.

"Then the tire wasn't stolen," Susan said in relief.

Penny shook her head. "I'm not so sure of that, Sue. It looks to me as if these numbers have been changed. Wait a minute!"

She darted into the house, returning with her father's magnifying glass. Using it to study the figures upon the wheel, the girls could plainly see that the numbers had been altered.

"To think I'd buy a stolen wheel!" Susan exclaimed indignantly. "I'm going right back and tell that dealer a thing or two!"

"You can't very well do that. We would be in no position to prove anything."

"I suppose you're right," Susan admitted.

"I'd like to see the establishment where you bought the tire," Penny said after a moment's pause. "Could you point it out to me?"

"Yes, I'll take you there now if you like."

Penny rolled the lawn mower into the garage and climbed into the coupe beside her chum.

"How do you like your car by this time?" she inquired as they drove toward South Lake Street.

"Not so well. It starts hard and has a funny sound in the engine. In a few days I mean to take it back to the Brunner garage for a complete overhaul."

South Lake Street was located in the poorer section of Belton City. The neighborhood was noted for its second-hand stores and it was said that sooner or later stolen merchandise found its way into the crowded little shops which lined the narrow thoroughfare. Often wares were piled upon the sidewalks to attract an unwary buyer. Stoves, cheap tables, and all manner of hardware rubbed elbows with clever brass jugs, imported vases and Oriental rugs.

Presently, Susan halted her car in front of a tire

shop which was located at the outskirts of "second hand" row.

"This is the place," she announced.

The owner of the shop, a short, squat little man with beady black eyes, stood at the window. He eyed the girls sharply.

"Shall we go in?" Susan asked.

"Let's, but we mustn't act as if we suspect anything."

Assuming a casual attitude, they sauntered into the shop. The dealer recognized Susan instantly. On her first visit he had been a trifle too cordial, but now he regarded her shrewdly.

"Something?" he inquired.

"My friend wishes to buy a new wheel," Susan informed. "She'd like to see one like I bought yesterday."

Again the dealer cast a sharp glance at Penny.

"Haven't I seen you in here before?" he asked.

Penny shook her head. "No, this is the first time I ever came into your store."

"I've seen you somewhere," the man muttered.

"Now, I know! You're Christopher Nichols' daughter!" He pronounced the name of the detective with a slight sneer.

"Yes, I am," Penny acknowledged reluctantly. "But I'm sure I've never seen you before."

"That's quite likely."

"Then how did you know me?"

"That's my business," the dealer retorted shortly. "I am sorry, but I can't do business with you. Good day."

Penny stood her ground.

"Haven't you any tires for sale?"

"Not for you, I haven't. You're a snooper just like your father! Get out of here!"

Penny would have carried the argument further, but Susan tugged at her sleeve. They hastily left the shop. As they drove away, they saw the dealer standing at the plate glass window, watching.

"Such a horrible man!" Susan gasped. "I was actually afraid of him. What made him act like that?"

"I think he must have guessed why we came,"

Penny told her. "As a sleuth I seem to be a walking advertisement of my calling!"

"He recognized you the minute you stepped into the store. Didn't that strike you as queer?"

"Yes, it did, Susan. I'm almost certain that man is dealing in stolen tires. He's probably afraid of the law. It's to his advantage to recognize plain-clothesmen and persons who might cause him trouble. I imagine I've been seen with my father."

"I should think the police could arrest him."

"It isn't as easy as one might believe, Susan. If a fence is caught with stolen merchandise he claims to have purchased it in good faith. Actually he has taken it off the hands of some thief. An arrest is hard to make."

"Then there's nothing we can do?"

"I don't know. I'll ask Father when he comes home tonight."

"I think a fence is even more contemptible than a thief," Susan said scornfully. "I'd give anything if I hadn't bought that tire."

"I'm glad you did," Penny smiled, "for the clue we gained may prove useful to Father."

The girls were relieved when they reached the end of South Lake and turned into a more pleasant street. Driving toward their homes they relapsed into a long silence, each absorbed in her own thoughts. There were occasions when the two friends talked frantically for hours. There were other times when they would speak scarcely a word, yet enjoy perfect understanding.

Penny had slumped in her seat. Suddenly, she straightened, her eyes riveted upon a pedestrian who was crossing the street in front of the coupe.

"Susan, isn't that Jerry Barrows?" she demanded excitedly.

The car swerved wildly as Susan turned to look.

"It is!" she exclaimed.

"Stop the car," Penny pleaded. "I want to talk with him."

Susan brought the coupe to a halt at the curbing. Penny sprang out.

"Jerry Barrows!" she called.

The boy wheeled and saw her. He hesitated an instant, then turned and ran.

CHAPTER IX

A Trap

"WAIT! I want to talk with you!" Penny called.

The boy paid no heed. As she ran after him he darted into the nearest alley.

Provoked, Penny hastened back to the car where Susan was waiting.

"Let's try to catch him," she proposed, springing in beside her chum.

Susan turned the coupe in the narrow street and drove into the alley. They could see the boy only a short distance ahead.

"We'll overtake him," Penny cried jubilantly.

Aware that he was being pursued, the boy ran faster. Then noticing an opening between two buildings, he squeezed through it and was lost to view.

Penny tried to follow afoot but soon gave it up. She returned to the coupe disheartened.

"He eluded us this time, Sue. I suppose that boy thought I meant to have him arrested. Actually, I only wanted to question him."

For some twenty-five minutes the girls cruised around the block, hoping to sight Jerry Barrows again. Although they kept close watch of the alleys he did not reappear.

"Did you notice anything peculiar about that boy's appearance?" Penny inquired as they turned toward home.

"No, why?"

"He was dressed much better than on that night when we caught him in our garage. He doesn't look as if he had ever had much hard luck."

"I imagine his entire story was a lie," Susan declared. "He didn't keep his promise to call at your father's office, and now he runs like a coward when we try to talk with him."

"I don't see how I was taken in so easily," Penny confessed ruefully. "I couldn't help liking the boy. I hoped he would turn over a new leaf."

Alighting at the Nichols home, she invited her chum to remain for dinner.

"I can't tonight," Susan told her regretfully. "We're having guests."

"I suppose I'll have to eat alone then. No use expecting Dad home."

In this she was mistaken. Entering the house, she discovered Mr. Nichols submerged in his favorite easy chair.

"I didn't look for you home so early, Dad."

"Nor did I expect to make it when I left the house this morning. However, I must return to the office immediately after dinner."

"Is it so very important?" Penny demanded.

Her father smiled.

"Lonesome?"

"Not exactly, only the evenings seem so long."

"Why don't you go to a moving picture show?"

"I've seen every good one in town. Besides, I'm tired of movies."

"I realize I am being a very poor father," Mr. Nichols acknowledged, reaching over to squeeze her hand. "You might come back to the office with me."

"I'd like that," Penny said instantly.

"It will be very dull," her father warned.

Directly after dinner, they motored to Mr. Nichols new office opposite the Brunner garage. Since the detective expected to occupy it only a few weeks at the most, it was equipped with the barest of necessities. There was a battered desk, three chairs and two telephones. Nothing more.

"What in the world do you do here?" Penny questioned.

"Mostly sit and wait," the detective admitted. "I receive reports from some of my men here. During the day I watch the street."

With a wave of his hand he indicated a powerful field glass which lay upon the desk.

Penny picked it up, training it upon the Brunner garage on the opposite side of the street.

"Why, it brings everything remarkably close! Do you sit here at the window and watch for the auto thieves?"

"Something like that. We've set a trap."

"A trap?" Penny was all interest.

"Yes, we've planted several expensive new cars in key positions on the street. Our men are

secretly watching them, of course. We hope that the auto thieves will select one of our models to strip."

"It must be tedious waiting."

"It is, but if we catch the gang our patience will have been rewarded."

"But what of Rap Molberg?" Penny questioned doubtfully. "Surely he must delegate the actual thievery to others."

"I'm not so sure," Mr. Nichols said slowly. "It wouldn't surprise me to learn that Molberg acts upon orders from someone higher up. However that may be, if we capture some of the lesser fry, they can be made to talk."

The detective busied himself at his desk. For a time Penny amused herself by watching pedestrians through the field glass. Growing tired of that, she buried herself in a magazine. It was not very interesting. By nine o'clock she was thoroughly bored.

"I think I'll go home," she announced. "I don't believe anything exciting will happen tonight."

"So that's why you came," her father chided.

"And I thought it was because you craved my company!"

"I did, but this bare office is too depressing."

"Then I'll excuse you," Mr. Nichols smiled. "Take a taxi home if you like."

"No, I think I'll walk."

It was a pleasant mellow evening and Penny was in the mood for a long stroll. She chose a roundabout route home.

She was absent-mindedly crossing a street, thinking of nothing in paticular, when an automobile without headlights shot past her at a high rate of speed. Frightened, Penny sprang backwards.

"The nerve of that driver!" she thought. "He missed me by inches."

She watched the car swerve around a corner and race up a dead-end street.

"Why, this is the very place where I lost track of Rap Molberg!" she told herself.

She rushed to the corner. Her fascinated gaze followed the retreating automobile. It tore madly to the end of the street where it abruptly halted.

Penny lost sight of it for an instant. Then to her surprise, the headlights were flashed on. In the reflected light she saw the tall walls of a large manufacturing plant.

The beam was turned off again. Darkness swallowed up the car.

While she was straining to see, Penny heard the shrill blast of a warning siren from far up the street. The next instant, a police radio cruiser shot past.

With a loud screaming of brakes, the police car came to a stop not far from Penny.

"Did you see an automobile without headlights come this way?" the driver asked tersely.

Penny was only too glad to offer information.

"It turned into this dead-end," she began.

The officers did not wait to hear more. With a roar, the cruiser was off again. It reached the end of the street and halted because it could go no farther.

Penny, bent upon missing nothing, followed as fast as she could.

By the time she reached the radio cruiser one of

the officers had alighted. He was looking carefully about. Sighting Penny, he walked over to her.

"Say you! I thought you told us that car came this way."

"It did," Penny maintained staunchly. "I saw it go to the very end of this street. The lights flashed on for an instant. Then the car seemed to vanish. I think it must have gone into that building."

She indicated the Hamilton Manufacturing Plant. The officer surveyed it briefly.

"Don't kid me!" he snapped. "Only a Houdini ever went through solid walls!"

He climbed back into the police car, saying gruffly to the driver: "Get going, Philips. It was a wrong steer. We must have missed that car at the turn."

Penny waited until the cruiser disappeared around the corner. Then she crossed the street and stood staring meditatively at the tall walls of the Hamilton Plant. There was no doorway leading into the building.

"It's uncanny," she murmured. "Yet I know

very well that car went in there some way." The building was entirely dark. There were no windows on the street side. Only a vast expanse of unbroken wall.

"It's too dark to see anything tonight," Penny decided after a brief hesitation. "Tomorrow I'll come back and perhaps make a few interesting discoveries!"

And with that resolution, she turned and walked rapidly toward home.

CHAPTER X

The Vanishing Car

PENNY fully intended to tell her father of her experience, but she retired before he came home. She overslept the next morning. When she descended to the breakfast room at nine o'clock, Mrs. Gallup told her that the detective had been gone for nearly an hour.

"Your father wasn't in a very good mood this morning," the housekeeper informed as she served Penny with a steaming hot waffle. "He complained about the coffee. When he does that it's always because something's gone wrong with his work."

"You mustn't mind Dad," Penny smiled. "We couldn't get along without you."

Mrs. Gallup sniffed.

"I do the best I can. The coffee does taste all right, doesn't it?"

"It's perfect."

"When your father's working on a hard case he always likes it strong as lye," the housekeeper complained. "But I know he was worried about something this morning."

"What makes you think so?"

"I heard him muttering to himself. Something about the stupidity of the police. It seems they let some crook get away last night after your father had laid careful plans to catch him."

"Not Rap Molberg?"

"I think that was the name. Mr. Nichols didn't tell me anything. I just heard him talking it over with himself."

"It's the only person he will discuss his business with," Penny chuckled.

After Mrs. Gallup had gone back into the kitchen she mulled over the information which the housekeeper had given her. It struck her as probable that the car which she had seen vanish down the dead-end street had been driven by Rap Molberg or one of his confederates.

"I wish I could have talked with Dad about it before he left the house," she thought.

Penny had not forgotten her resolution to visit the Hamilton Plant by daylight. As soon as she had helped Mrs. Gallup with the dishes, she left the house, walking directly to the scene of the previous evening's adventure.

The street was deserted. No one questioned her actions as she made a careful inspection of the old building which had housed the Hamilton Manufacturing Company until its failure. She examined the walls inch by inch, but although she was convinced it was there, she could find no hidden entrance.

Regardless of her failure to find evidence, Penny was unwilling to give up her original theory. She remained unshaken in her belief that the mysterious automobile had disappeared into the Hamilton building.

"There's no other place it could have gone," she reasoned. "I'll talk it over with Dad and see what he thinks."

When she stopped at his office, Mr. Nichols was not there nor could Miss Arrow tell her when he might return.

The detective did not come home for luncheon and late in the afternoon telephoned to say that he would take dinner downtown. Rather than spend an evening alone Penny called Susan, arranging that they should go to the library together.

The girls spent an hour in the reading room, but for some reason Penny could not interest herself in the magazines. She kept turning through them and laying them aside. She felt unusually restless.

Presently an electrical magazine attracted her attention. She glanced over it carelessly until she came to a particular article which dealt with photo-electric cells and the clever purposes for which they were used.

"Why, these 'magic-eyes' are almost human," she commented in an undertone to Susan. "They turn lights on and off, cook meals, and open doors. when a beam of light strikes the cell——"

"I've heard of them before," Susan interrupted in a tone which clearly implied that she was not in the least interested.

Penny took the hint and dropped the subject. But she became absorbed in the article. When she

closed the magazine a half hour later, her face was flushed with excitement.

"Susan, let's get away from here," she proposed in a whisper. "I've just had an inspiration!"

Grumbling a little at being forced to leave a fascinating story before she had finished it, Susan followed her friend from the building.

"What about this inspiration of yours?" she demanded as they walked to Penny's parked roadster.

"It's this way, Susan. I knew there was a logical explanation for the mysterious disappearance of that car Rap Molberg was driving. Let's go over to the Hamilton Factory this minute and test out my new theory."

"You may know what you're talking about, but I'm sure I don't, Penny Nichols."

"That's because you wouldn't let me tell you about that article I was reading," Penny laughed. "But I'll explain everything as we go along."

Without pausing to consider that it might not be safe to investigate the abandoned manufacturing plant at such a late hour, the girls drove directly into the hilly section of Belton City. Penny

turned into the familiar dead-end street and was relieved to find no sign of other vehicles.

She halted her roadster at the very end of the pavement in such a position that the bright headlights played upon the massive walls of the Hamilton building.

"It must be located higher up," Penny murmured to herself.

"What is?" Susan demanded. "I don't see what you're about anyway."

Without answering, Penny directed the beam of her spotlight upon the stone structure. Inch by inch she moved it systematically over the high wall.

"Perhaps it's only a silly idea," she acknowledged at last, "but I believe that somewhere in the wall there must be a secret door—one mechanically operated. No doubt the outline of the opening is disguised by the many irregular cracks in the masonry."

"If you're looking for a secret opening, why not come in the daytime when you can see much better?"

"I've been here in the daytime and the door

can't be detected—at least not by the eye. I'm hoping to have better luck this time."

"I can't for the life of me see how," Susan began, but ended with a startled gasp.

A portion of the massive wall was slowly moving backward.

"Just as I thought!" Penny chuckled in delight. "Now we know how Rap Molberg escaped from the police the other night."

In fascination the girls watched the widening gap in the wall. Soon it was large enough for an automobile to easily drive through into the empty building.

"How did you open it?" Susan asked in awe.

"The beam of my spotlight struck a photo-electric cell which was secreted near the eaves," Penny explained briefly. "You should have read about it at the library."

"I wish I had now. It's almost uncanny."

"Let's drive in and have a look at the inside," Penny suggested daringly.

"Won't it be dangerous?" Susan demurred.

"The place seems to be deserted. But probably

it would be wiser if you waited here and I went in alone."

"No, if you're going to risk it, so am I!"

"Then here goes," Penny said.

She drove the roadster through the opening into what appeared to be an empty room. Curiously, the girls glanced about. Suddenly Susan uttered a stifled scream.

"The door! It's closing!"

Already the opening had narrowed to a mere slit. It was too late to retreat.

"Don't lose your nerve," Penny advised, although her own heart was beating at a furious rate. "We'll find some way to open that door."

"Someone may have seen us drive in and closed it deliberately!"

"I don't think so, Susan. It must have closed automatically."

"Anyway, we're prisoners inside this horrible place! We'll starve to death before anyone will suspect we're here!"

"I got you into this and I'll get you out," Penny announced firmly. "There must be some button

or lever that opens the door from the inside."

Although the headlights of the roadster illuminated a portion of the large room, many of the corners and crannies remained dark. Taking her flashlight from the pocket of the car, Penny moved cautiously about searching for some means of escape. Susan remained huddled in her seat, too terrified to move.

Penny examined the door, but it would not budge when she threw her weight against it. She could find no lock or catch.

There were several windows high overhead but without a ladder she could not hope to reach them. She was growing more disturbed than she cared to admit, when Susan called to her.

"Penny, I think there's some sort of lever over here by the car."

Penny flashed her beam in that direction and was relieved to see that her chum was right.

"It must operate the door, Susan! We should be out of here in a jiffy!"

Confidently, she grasped the long handle and pulled with all her strength upon the iron lever.

From below came the low rumble of moving machinery. Penny and Susan riveted their eyes hopefully upon the door. It did not open.

Instead, a square of floor upon which the roadster was resting, slowly began to sink.

Uttering a frightened scream, Susan tried to open the car door.

"Save me!" she cried frantically.

Penny leaped nimbly down upon the running board.

"It's all right," she laughed shakily. "We're only descending in an elevator."

"We'll be killed before we ever get out of this dreadful place!"

The elevator struck the lower floor with a gentle thud. Penny then climbed into the car and drove it a few feet forward. Relieved of its weight the platform slowly rose again until it had resumed its former position.

"We're worse off now than we were before," Susan moaned.

"I think this must be the way out," Penny comforted.

She indicated a tunnel-like opening directly ahead. Susan who had been looking in the opposite direction had noticed a small room which appeared to be an office. She called her chum's attention to it. Together, they cautiously peered inside.

Save for a battered desk and several chairs the tiny room was empty. Cigarette ashes and old papers were scattered over the floor, giving evidence that the office had been used recently. Penny tried the desk and found it locked.

She picked up a few scraps of paper from the floor. They were without interest.

A folded newspaper lying upon one of the chairs drew her attention. Opening it, she noticed that an article on the front page had been underscored with pencil lines. The headline read:

"AUTO ACCESSORY THEFTS
ON STEADY INCREASE HERE"

The story hinted that Belton City police had been unable to cope with the situation and that local insurance companies long harassed by an

organized gang, had turned the case over to private detectives.

Above the latter statement someone had written the name of Christopher Nichols in pencil.

Penny carefully folded the newspaper, replacing it upon the chair exactly as she had found it.

"Let's get away from here before we're caught," she urged. "I suspect we're in a Molberg hideout."

"Nothing would please me better than to leave this place," Susan retorted grimly. "Just lead me to an exit."

"I think the tunnel probably will take us out. Come on, let's see."

Returning to the roadster the dark passage seemed forbiddingly dangerous. Carefully examining the concrete floor, Penny discovered tire patterns in the dirt. Other cars had used the tunnel.

With the engine at idling speed, they drove into it. The tunnel led downward at such a steep angle that soon Penny was forced to use her brakes to keep from going too fast.

"Where will this thing end?" Susan asked.

Even as she spoke they reached level ground. An ordinary double garage door barred the way. Susan sprang out to open it.

"Why, we're in an empty garage," she announced as she swung back the door.

Penny drove the roadster through and waited until Susan had closed the door behind her. Through a plateglass window the girls could now see the street. But it took them some time to locate another unlocked door which permitted them to escape.

Once safely out of the building, they pulled up at the side of the road to take note of their surroundings. At first they could not imagine where they were.

"Why, this must be Arlington Avenue," Penny decided. "We're several hundred feet lower than we were when we left that dead-end street on the hilltop!"

"What a clever means for a crook to escape a police chase!"

"Yes, isn't it? I'm almost certain the place has been used by the Molberg gang."

"Then we can't get away from here too quick," Susan declared nervously.

Penny laughed.

"We're safe enough now. Besides, I imagine this escape is never used except in an emergency—probably only when the police are hot on the trail."

Susan glanced at her watch.

"It's after ten o'clock and I promised mother I'd be back at nine."

"I'll take you straight home," Penny promised. "I don't suppose I need to mention it, but I think we shouldn't tell anyone about what we discovered tonight. At least not until the police have been notified."

"Of course not," Susan agreed instantly. "Why don't you have your father make the report for us?"

"I'd like to handle it that way, if you don't mind," Penny said eagerly.

"Then let's leave it that way. Aside from Mr. Nichols we'll not tell a soul about our discovery tonight."

A few minutes later the girls took leave of each other. Penny continued alone toward her own home.

Turning a corner in one of the outlying neighborhood business sections, she noticed a girl in blue hurrying along the street. Recognizing Betty Davis, Penny halted her roadster at the curbing.

The girl did not notice for she had paused to stare into the window of a café. A group of young men could be seen within, laughing and talking.

It was not the type of place frequented by women, and Penny was astonished when the girl started to open the door. But with her hand on the knob, Betty Davis seemed to reconsider, for she turned and walked rapidly away.

Penny drew alongside in her roadster.

"Going my way?" she asked cheerfully. "I'll be glad to give you a lift."

CHAPTER XI

A Threat

BETTY DAVIS wheeled quickly about. She laughed to cover her confusion.

"Why, Miss Nichols! How you startled me!"

"I didn't mean to do that," Penny smiled. "If you're on your way home, can't I take you there in my car?"

The girl hesitated, and involuntarily, her eyes wandered toward the café. Then she stepped into the car.

"It's very kind of you to take me home, Miss Nichols. I'm not out alone this late in the evening as a rule, but something important came up. I was searching for my brother."

"Jimmie?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I think your father mentioned his name."

"He didn't say anything about——" Betty broke

off, finishing with an embarrassed laugh: "but then I know he didn't."

"Your father only mentioned that he had a son by that name," Penny said, eyeing her companion curiously.

"Jimmie is a good boy but he's caused father a great deal of worry," Betty added, feeling that some explanation was required. "Lately he's fallen in with bad companions."

"That is a pity," Penny murmured. "You mentioned that you were looking for him. Can't I help you?"

"Oh, no," Betty told her hastily, "I don't think I'll bother after all."

Penny permitted the matter to drop but she was not mistaken in suspecting that the reason her companion had decided to give up the search was because she already had located her brother at the café.

"Won't you come in for a few minutes?" Betty urged when the car stopped at her door. "Father isn't due home until late tonight and I'm all alone."

"I might stop a little while," Penny agreed.

Despite Betty's somewhat queer actions, she had liked the girl from the very first, and was eager to become better acquainted.

The Davis home was modestly furnished, yet with excellent taste. Penny could not refrain from referring to the clever color scheme which had been carried out so successfully in the living room.

"I'm glad you like it," Betty smiled. "You see, I'm studying to be an interior decorator."

"Why, how interesting."

"I attend night school," Betty explained. "Or rather I did. Just now Father is a little pressed for money so I've given it up for a few months."

"I hope you'll be able to go on with it again."

"Yes, so do I, for it's the one ambition of my life. I think after Jimmie is a little older it will be easier. Just now he's at the age where he feels he must have fine clothes and plenty of spending money."

"Perhaps you're too indulgent a sister," Penny smiled.

"Jimmie is only a year younger than I," Betty

explained, "but since Mother died five years ago, I've always felt responsible for him. Lately I've been terribly worried."

"On account of the company he keeps?"

"Yes, that and other things." Betty arose and nervously crossed over to the fireplace. "I don't mean to unburden myself upon you, but lately Jimmie has been doing wild things. Father doesn't half suspect the truth. I'm half sick with trying to decide if I should tell him or not."

"Probably it would relieve your mind if you did," Penny advised kindly.

"Yes, but Father has always taken such pride in Jimmie. I can't bear to hurt him."

"Perhaps he could bring your brother to his senses."

"I'm afraid it may be almost too late. Jimmie is so headstrong. He won't listen to anyone. He's changed so much the last few months."

"It seems to me that your father should know the truth," Penny said quietly.

Betty Davis' face had grown slightly pale.

"I realize I should tell him," she acknowledged,

"but I can't. There's a special reason why—don't ask me to explain." Abruptly, she tried to change the subject, saying lightly: "My brother is very handsome, I think. Would you care to see his photograph?"

"Indeed I would," Penny returned politely.

She waited while Betty went into an adjoining room after it. As the girl returned, a car was driving slowly past the house.

"That must be Father," Betty declared, moving toward the window.

Penny heard the automobile halt at the curbing. The next instant a hard object crashed through the windowpane, dropping with a thud at Betty's feet. Almost by a miracle she had escaped being struck by the flying splinters of glass.

Penny sprang to her feet, rushing to the door. She caught only a fleeting glimpse of the retreating car.

Betty was staring at a piece of paper which lay upon the carpet. It had been wrapped around a small stone.

"You read it," she begged Penny. "I'm afraid."

Penny reached down and picked it up. The message had been printed on cheap brown wrapping paper. It bore the warning:

"JEROME DAVIS, THIS IS THE LAST WARNING YOU WILL RECEIVE FROM US. WE GIVE YOU TWENTY-FOUR HOURS TO CHANGE YOUR MIND."

"It's a threat from the Molberg gang!" Betty declared tensely as Penny finished reading the message aloud. "Oh, I'll never feel easy again until every member of that outfit has been placed behind bars! What do you think they will do when Father defies them?"

"Probably nothing," Penny comforted. "Most anonymous notes are sent by cowards and the threats seldom carried out. At least Dad doesn't regard them very seriously. He's been threatened by the Molberg gang too."

"And have they made no attempt to harm him?" Betty asked.

"Not to my knowledge. Dad seems more than able to look after himself, and I'm certain your father knows how to protect himself too."

"He should," Betty admitted. "He's one of the best marksmen on the police force."

"Then I think Rap Molberg is the one who should be on his guard," Penny smiled.

By making light of the threatening note she tried to relieve Betty of anxiety. Her efforts were not very successful. When she left the house a half hour later the girl was still excited and overwrought.

Not until Penny was nearly home did it occur to her that she had forgotten to look at the photograph of Jimmie Davis.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter," she thought.

As she drove the roadster into the garage, Mrs. Gallup came down the path to meet her.

"I'm sorry to be so late," Penny said quickly before the housekeeper could take her to task. "A million and one things detained me. Dad's home, I suppose?"

"No, he isn't. But someone has been trying to get you on the telephone for the past hour."

"Probably it was Dad."

"It may have been, but it didn't sound like his voice. Listen, isn't that the phone now?"

They could hear the bell ringing inside the house. Penny ran to answer it. As she took down the receiver, she was greeted by a masculine voice. But it was not the detective who had telephoned.

"Is this Miss Nichols?" she was asked.

"Yes," Penny returned quietly, aware from the other's tone that she must prepare herself for bad news.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Nichols, but your father has been hurt."

"Oh! Badly?"

"We're not sure yet. He is still unconscious. Can you come at once?"

"Yes, yes, of course! Which hospital?"

"He has been taken to a private home."

"Then tell me how to get there."

"It won't be necessary. A taxi has already been sent for you. It should be there by this time."

"I'll be waiting," Penny promised.

She hung up the receiver and turned to the housekeeper who was hovering anxiously at her elbow.

"Dad's been hurt," she said tersely to hide her

emotion. "I don't know how badly for I couldn't learn the details. I must go to him at once."

"Oh, you poor thing," Mrs. Gallup swept the trembling girl into her arms.

They clung to one another for an instant, then Penny resolutely brushed away her tears.

"It probably isn't as bad as we fear," she said hopefully.

Catching up her pocketbook from the table, she hurried out upon the porch to wait for the taxicab.

CHAPTER XII

Kidnapped

AS a dark colored cab stopped in front of the Nichols residence, Penny ran to the curbing before the driver could alight.

"You were sent here to take me to my father?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss."

The driver kept his head lowered so that Penny could not see his face clearly, but she was too troubled to notice anything wrong.

"Is Father badly hurt?" she questioned anxiously.

"I can't tell you, Miss. I was only told to come here for you."

The driver opened the door, and Penny stepped into the car. They sped away.

Presently Penny noticed that the taxi man seemed to be avoiding the main streets of the city. She thought little of it until she chanced to catch

a glimpse of the driver's face in the mirror. She had never viewed such a hardened countenance. The man appeared to be watching her every move. It gave her a sudden chill.

"Where is my father?" she questioned abruptly.

"At a house out in the country," the driver returned gruffly.

"I didn't even know that he had left the city," Penny said suspiciously. "Tell me, how was he injured?"

"I don't know any of the details. You'll have to wait until you get there."

Penny leaned back against the cushions, to all appearances, reassured. Actually, she was terrified. The conviction was steadily growing in her mind that she had been the victim of treachery. She was almost certain that she was being kidnapped. How decidedly stupid she had been to walk into such a trap!

Penny felt actually sick as she considered the possible consequence of falling into the hands of the Molberg gang. It was not for herself that she feared but for her father. She knew him well

enough to realize that he would sacrifice everything to be assured of her safety.

"If I let on that I suspect something is wrong it will only put the driver on his guard," she thought. "My best chance is to act innocent and watch for an opportunity to jump out of the car."

Already they were speeding along a dark, country road. On either side, the highway was lined with tall maples and oak trees. Houses were few and far between.

Penny tried to make careful mental note of the route they were taking from the city. It was difficult to distinguish objects for they were traveling rapidly.

As they turned into a bumpy, winding narrow road which led up a steep hill, Penny's uneasiness increased. From the manner in which the driver surveyed the roadside, she guessed that the wild ride was nearly ended.

"It's now or never," she told herself grimly.

The car had slowed down for the hill. Watching her chance, Penny made a sudden dive for the door. It was locked.

She located the catch, but not until the driver had managed to halt the car. With an enraged snarl he caught her roughly by the arm just as she flung open the door.

Penny wriggled from his grasp and started to run down the road.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" the driver shouted furiously.

Penny paid no heed. She raced as fast as she could go down the hill.

The driver, an agile man despite his heavy build, took up the pursuit. Penny could hear his feet pounding on the hard road behind her. He was gaining.

Her breath began to come with increasing difficulty. She could run no faster.

At the foot of the hill Penny noticed an automobile without headlights. She was sure it had not been parked there a few minutes earlier when the cab had passed. Had some of Rap Molberg's men followed the taxi? In that event, she was running straight into another trap.

Penny had no choice but to continue toward the

waiting automobile. But as three men sprang from behind it with drawn revolvers, her heart sank within her. Her brave attempt at escape must end in failure.

A stone lay in the road. Penny did not see it. She stumbled, and, completely exhausted, fell face downward into the dirt.

"Stay where you are!" a cool voice ordered. "Don't move!"

She remained as she was, prone upon the ground. A revolver barked. There was a flash of fire dangerously close by. An answering bullet from the opposite direction whizzed over her head.

The three men moved cautiously up the hill. They had their quarry covered.

"Drop your gun!" came the sharp order.

The taxi driver mutely obeyed. As handcuffs were snapped over his wrists, Penny hurried forward to view her rescuers. One of the men she instantly recognized as a detective employed by her father; the other two she had never before seen.

"How did you get here?" she gasped.

"We've been trailing you all day," the investi-

gator explained as he deftly searched his prisoner for concealed weapons. "The entire week for that matter. Your father's orders."

"You mean he's had me shadowed?" Penny demanded indignantly.

"Mr. Nichols was afraid something like this might be attempted."

"I guess it was lucky for me that I was trailed," Penny acknowledged gratefully. "Otherwise, I'd have been kidnapped."

She watched as the prisoner was led to the waiting car.

"Do you know who he is?" she asked a detective.

"Looks like Angel Face Myers, one of Molberg's boys. Can't be sure 'till we've mugged and fingerprinted him at the station."

The three men from the Nichols Agency plied the prisoner with sharp questions. He maintained a sullen silence.

"I'd guess he was taking Miss Nichols to that abandoned house at the top of the hill," one of the detectives surmised shrewdly. "I'll stay here and guard the prisoner while you fellows investigate

the place. Don't let anyone get away from you."

The other two detectives disappeared into the darkness. Twenty minutes later they returned to report that they had found no one at the old house, although there was evidence of a hurried departure. The shots previously fired by the detectives had served as a warning.

Riding back to the city with the handcuffed prisoner, Penny wondered how faithfully her father's investigators had followed her movements of the evening. Had they noted her call at the Davis home or the visit she and Susan had paid to the Hamilton building?

"I suppose I've been trailed everywhere tonight," she ventured conversationally.

"You almost gave us the slip," one of the detectives told her with a smile. "In fact, you did for awhile."

"When was that?"

"Right after you left the library."

"You turned off somewhere and we lost you for a time. Didn't locate you again until you turned up at your own home."

Penny was relieved. The detectives could not possibly be aware of the secret entrance into the Hamilton Plant. She would still be the first to report the discovery to her father.

The detectives dropped Penny at her own home after explaining that it might be necessary for her to appear in court later on to identify the prisoner.

"I'll be very glad to do it," Penny promised.

As she ran up the front steps the door was flung open and Mrs. Gallup rushed out to meet her. She flung her arms about the girl.

"Penny!" she cried tremulously. "How thankful I am that you are safe! Your father came home fifteen minutes ago. Then we knew that the telephone call was a fake."

"Where is Dad now?"

"He started for the police station."

"Then I guess he'll learn the truth in a few minutes if he's still there."

"Tell me what happened, Penny."

In the midst of the tale, a car was heard on the driveway, and a minute later Mr. Nichols entered the house. Although he was never inclined to be

demonstrative, the detective clasped his daughter in his arms and Penny noticed that his hands trembled slightly.

"I've just heard the entire story at the police station," he told her. "You gave me a terrific scare, Penny."

"I gave myself one, too. If it hadn't been for your men who shadowed me, I'm afraid I'd never have returned to tell the tale."

"I doubt that the gangsters would have actually harmed you, but they would have used you as a weapon to strike back at me. I am sorry about having you trailed, Penny, but you understand my position. I was afraid of this very thing."

"It's all right," Penny smiled. "Only your men aren't so clever at keeping me in sight. I unintentionally gave them the slip earlier in the evening."

Mrs. Gallup had gone to the kitchen to prepare sandwiches and an iced drink. Taking advantage of her absence, Penny gave a detailed report of her visit to the Hamilton Plant. At first her father listened almost incredulously.

"It sounds fantastic, Penny. And yet, it's just

the sort of trickery which would appeal to Rap Molberg. You say the door is operated by means of a photo-electric cell?"

"That's what I think. At least when the beam of my light struck a certain spot on the wall, the door opened."

Mr. Nichols arose and paced rapidly back and forth across the floor.

"I'm going to take you into my confidence, Penny," he said quietly. "For days my men have been circling in on Rap and his gang. We've located one of their hideouts, and we're raiding the place tomorrow night. It now seems advisable to surround the Hamilton building simultaneously. Then there will be no chance that any of the crooks can use the underground ramp to make a get-away."

"Will the police make the raid?" Penny inquired curiously.

"Yes and no. So far I have taken only one man into my confidence."

"And who is that?"

"Jerome Davis."

"I was at his house this evening," Penny announced. "A threatening note was thrown through the window while I was there."

She repeated the contents of the message.

"No doubt it came from the Molberg gang," her father said. "They are doing everything in their power to intimidate Jerome Davis. But I believe he is a man who can be trusted. Tomorrow night at eleven o'clock he will be ready with a picked group of policemen. No one but himself will know any of the details of the raid until it is actually on. In that way there will be almost no danger of the information leaking out."

"Where is this other hideout which is to be raided?"

"I can't tell you that. It isn't that I don't trust you, but sometimes an unguarded word will destroy the work of weeks."

"I guess it's just as well I don't know too much about it ahead of time," Penny agreed.

The conversation was checked as Mrs. Gallup came from the kitchen with a tray of sandwiches and a tall pitcher of fruit juice. For a time Penny

and her father confined their talk to less vital subjects. But when the housekeeper had gone from the room again, Mr. Nichols took up the matter where it had been dropped.

"If my raids tomorrow night are successful, it will end the case. We may need you, Penny, to show the officers how to get into the Hamilton building."

"I'd like to help," she assured him eagerly.

"Good," Mr. Nichols said warmly as he picked up the evening paper. "Until the appointed hour, don't go near the Plant. And mind, not a word of this to anyone."

CHAPTER XIII

The Raid

AT EXACTLY ten minutes to eleven on the following night, eight police cars rolled swiftly down the boulevard. In a congested portion of the city they drew up to the curbing, waiting for Christopher Nichols who rode with his daughter in a dark sedan.

Jerome Davis, in charge of the raid, came over to speak to the detective.

"Everything is all set, Mr. Nichols. We have the entire neighborhood bottled up. Every alley and street guarded."

"Good. And the Hamilton building?"

"It is surrounded. At exactly eleven my men will raid both places. It's a cinch we'll get Rap Molberg and his gang this time."

"You're certain no hint of the raid has leaked out?"

Jerome Davis laughed confidently.

"Even now my men aren't sure what's coming off. This raid can't fail, Mr. Nichols. We had a straight tip where Molberg could be found and we'll get him!"

"Then go ahead exactly as we planned," Mr. Nichols directed. "On to the Blind Pig Café!"

Jerome Davis returned to the waiting cars, relaying the detective's orders. In single file the police automobiles moved forward. They rounded a corner and bore down upon a brightly illuminated restaurant.

With a start Penny recognized it as the same place where she had met Betty Davis the previous evening.

"What a coincidence!" she thought. "How embarrassing it would be for Mr. Davis if his son should be found in there tonight!"

The appearance of the first officer in the doorway of the Blind Pig was sufficient to give warning that a raid was under way. The few persons who were dining inside made wild dashes for the doors and windows. They were quickly captured by officers stationed at all the exits. Although the room

lights had been snapped out, no shots were fired.

"Something is wrong!" Mr. Nichols exclaimed, abruptly leaving the sedan from which he had been watching. "It looks to me like a tip-off."

A few minutes after her father had disappeared into the café, Penny saw the policemen load perhaps six or seven prisoners into the waiting cars. But it was apparent even to her that the raid had failed. The persons arrested obviously were not members of the Molberg gang.

Mr. Nichol's face was dark when he came back to the sedan. Without a word he started the engine and drove rapidly off.

"What happened?" Penny asked timidly.

"Oh, the usual," the detective snapped. "It was a tip-off. Only a few persons were in the café and the clubrooms to the rear were completely deserted. Not a scrap of evidence. We'll have to release all the prisoners."

"Where are we going now, Dad?"

"To the Hamilton Plant. There's just a chance that the raid there was more successful, though I doubt it."

"Who could have carried the information?" Penny inquired.

"I don't know. That's what bothers me. Penny, you're certain you never dropped a word of this?"

"Why, of course not!"

"I don't mean intentionally, of course. You're sure you never mentioned the raid to your friend Susan?"

"Absolutely not," Penny maintained indignantly. "For that matter, I didn't know the Blind Pig was the place you were raiding."

"That's true," Mr. Nichols acknowledged. "I didn't mean to offend you, Penny. I was only seeking information. I can't see how the news leaked out unless—"

"Unless what?" Penny probed.

"I'll not say it."

"You meant, unless Jerome Davis had betrayed his trust!"

"Well, yes, that was what I was thinking. This is the first occasion I've had to question his honesty. It may be I haven't given enough consideration to the stories which have circulated regarding Davis."

"You said you believed they were started by his political enemies."

"Yes, and I'm still inclined to think that, although the failure of this raid looks peculiar to say the least. I'll have to be more careful in my dealings with Davis."

"If the Molberg outfit didn't regard him as an enemy then why would they throw a warning note through the window?" Penny demanded.

"That could have been faked—it might have been a dodge to impress you."

"I don't see how it could have been, Dad. You see, I met Betty Davis quite by accident that evening. On the spur of the moment I accepted her invitation to stop a few minutes at the house. It was while I was there that the message was thrown through the window. It couldn't have been planned."

"Not very well," Mr. Nichols admitted. "Davis may be honest enough, but if I find he's a loose talker, his usefulness for me will be ended."

The sedan had reached the dead-end street which led to the vacant Hamilton Plant. An of-

ficer stepped out of the shadow to challenge Mr. Nichols, but recognizing him, saluted instead.

"What luck?" the detective asked.

"I can't tell you, sir. I've heard nothing since I was stationed here."

Penny and her father drove on between the rows of police cars which lined the narrow street. As they halted at the far end of the thoroughfare, an officer came to speak with them.

"Did you get into the building?" Mr. Nichols inquired tersely.

"Yes, your daughter's instructions were very clear. We had no trouble."

"What did you find?"

"Everything was exactly as Miss Nichols said. The place has been used by the Molberg outfit, that's clear. But there wasn't a sign of anyone, and the desk which Miss Nichols mentioned as being in the little office, was gone."

"Looks like they got wind of what was up, doesn't it?"

"That's the way I figure it," the officer returned.

"Not much we can do except wreck the place so it can't be used again."

Mr. Nichols talked with several other policemen, and then, satisfied that he had learned all the details of the unsuccessful raid, took Penny home.

"I suppose this means we'll not be taking that vacation into the mountains very soon," she commented when they were alone in the living room.

"I'm afraid of it, Penny. Would you care to go by yourself?"

"No, I'd prefer to wait until you can go too. Besides, I've become deeply absorbed in this Molberg case."

"I've noticed that," her father smiled. "I never suspected that my own daughter had such hidden talents for sleuthing."

"Now you're teasing!" Penny accused.

"No, your discoveries have astonished me, Penny. Perhaps you were favored a little by luck, but you've unearthed information which even my most skilled investigators were unable to turn up."

"My clues didn't prove of much value after all."

"It wasn't your fault that they didn't. A detective must learn to expect disappointments."

"So it seems," Penny sighed. "Now that Rap Molberg escaped the police net, what will be your next move?"

"I don't know yet, Penny."

"Perhaps Rap Molberg will leave the city."

"I don't think there's much chance of that. He'll remain in hiding for a few days or weeks, then strike again. You must have a constant bodyguard, Penny."

"Oh, Dad! If you knew how I hated it! I couldn't feel that even my thoughts were my own!"

"Sorry, Penny, but it's for your own safety."

"Oh, all right, I submit," Penny grumbled good-naturedly. "Only if I must have someone tagging at my heels all the time, please make him tall and handsome!"

"I don't usually select my men for their beauty," Mr. Nichols smiled. "But I'll do the best I can for you."

Although Penny disliked the idea of being closely watched, actually a bodyguard was not as

annoying as she had imagined it might be. Joe Franey, the detective assigned by Mr. Nichols to the service, was young and, while not handsome, distinguished in appearance. His bearing gave no hint of his professional calling. Penny found Joe very likeable. He never irritated her by making her aware of his presence—in fact, for hours at a time she never saw him at all—yet when she was on the street she was seldom out of his sight.

For the next few days, following Joe's assignment to his new duties, Penny and Susan slyly amused themselves by trying to see if they could outwit him. They led the detective a gay chase from one end of the city to another. They dropped into department stores, dodging in one door and out another, but when they were confident they had baffled Joe, they were very apt to see him watching them from a doorway across the street.

Or if they entered a theatre apparently unobserved by the faithful sleuth they were almost certain to see him only a few seats behind. But soon Joe became such a fixture in Penny's life that she accepted him without much thought.

True to Mr. Nichols' prediction, all remained quiet on the Rap Molberg front save that the unsuccessful raid had stirred up an aftermath of bitter criticism. The local newspapers provided considerable unfavorable publicity; editors ran scorching editorials blaming Mr. Nichols and the police for the failure to break up the Molberg gang.

Infuriated by the comments of the press, the police commissioner called both the detective and Jerome Davis to his office. Neither could explain the failure of the raid. It was obvious that someone had allowed information to leak and since only Mr. Nichols and a few policemen had known the details of the raid, suspicion tended to center upon Jerome Davis.

"It's only a matter of days until he'll be discharged from the force," Mr. Nichols told his daughter.

"Surely you don't think he'd be guilty of helping Rap Molberg?" Penny questioned.

"I don't know what to believe. Davis was called on the carpet yesterday and given an opportunity to explain a number of things. He wouldn't talk."

"But that doesn't prove necessarily that he's guilty, does it?"

"No, but he's acted strangely of late. The fact remains that someone let information leak either by accident or deliberately. Davis was in a bad spot before this. Now I'm afraid nothing can save his job."

"I feel so sorry for Betty," Penny murmured. "She'll take it hard if her father is discharged."

"You mustn't worry about it," Mr. Nichols advised kindly. "Davis had his chance to make good and seemingly failed. Now matters must take their own course."

"Couldn't you do anything to save his position, Dad?"

"I doubt it, Penny. At any rate, I shouldn't care to interfere for I'm not convinced that the commissioner isn't right. Davis is a queer type."

"Just the same I can't help feeling he's honest," Penny maintained firmly. "Couldn't there have been another reason for the failure of the raid?"

"Yes, but Davis was under suspicion before this.

And since the raid he's been anything but cooperative."

"Then I suppose nothing can be done, but it seems a pity."

Penny did not speak of the matter again to her father but in secret she continued to mull over the unfortunate situation. She had developed a deep liking for Betty Davis, yet she readily acknowledged that in many ways the girl acted queerly.

"It's too much for me to figure out," Penny confessed to Susan one afternoon. "Everything seems to be such a hopeless contradiction. Betty lets on that she is desperately afraid her father will be harmed by Rap Molberg and yet the police claim that Mr. Davis is really abetting the criminals."

"Have you ever met her brother?"

"Jimmie?" Penny asked. "No, but from what she told me I suspect he's something of a problem."

"I haven't seen Betty in days," Susan remarked. "Why not call on her this afternoon?"

Penny hesitated an instant, then agreed. Considering her father's association with Mr. Davis

she was not certain that the visit would be very tactful.

"We must be careful and not say anything that could offend her," she warned.

"Of course," Susan agreed. "Shall we drive over in my car?"

At the Davis cottage a few minutes later, they caught a glimpse of someone moving about on the upper floor. But when they rapped upon the door there was no response.

"I know I saw Betty looking out of an upstairs window just as we drove up," Susan whispered.

"Perhaps she doesn't care to see us then. Come on, Sue, let's not knock again."

They quietly withdrew to the car.

"Where to now?" Susan inquired as she snapped on the ignition.

"Oh, anywhere. I've nothing special to do this afternoon."

Susan stepped on the electric starter, but the engine refused to respond. She readjusted gasoline and spark levers to no avail.

"Stalled again!" she complained bitterly. "I

never saw such a car! We've had nothing but trouble since we bought it."

"Perhaps it's only flooded," Penny suggested hopefully.

Susan shook her head.

"It's done this before. Nothing to do but call the garage. Anyway, Mr. Brunner promised he'd give the car a free overhaul, and this is his chance to make good."

The girls telephoned the Brunner garage from a drug store located directly across the street. They waited nearly half an hour before the blue service car arrived to tow them in.

"May I speak to Mr. Brunner?" Susan politely asked one of the garage employees.

"Sorry but he's busy," was the curt reply. "I'll handle any complaint you have to make."

Susan gave a somewhat lengthy account of her car troubles. The employee scarcely bothered to listen. When she had finished, he said briefly.

"I'll check the car over and have it ready in half an hour."

"Let's wait," Susan proposed.

They found chairs nearby. In fifteen minutes, the same employee returned to report that the car was ready.

"So soon?" Susan said in surprise. "Why, I'm sure you couldn't have checked over everything in such a short while."

"The car will start now. If you want a general overhaul you'll have to pay for it."

"But Mr. Brunner promised me when I bought the automobile that if anything went wrong he'd make it right!" Susan protested indignantly. "I've driven the car less than five hundred miles and it's almost falling apart! May I see Mr. Brunner?"

"He's in his office," the man informed reluctantly.

"And where is that?"

"Down the hall. The second door from the end."

Crossing through the deserted repair shop, the girls made their way down the dark hallway. The door which the employee had indicated stood slightly ajar.

As Penny and Susan drew near they heard angry voices.

"You can threaten me all you like, but I tell you I'm through! I'll never do any more work for you, Brunner!"

"You'll do exactly as I say or—" The manager abruptly broke off for he had noticed the two girls standing at the open door. "Come in, come in!" he beamed.

Penny's keen glance traveled beyond George Brunner to the person whom he had addressed in such an abusive tone.

It was Jerry Barrows.

CHAPTER XIV

Brunner's Explanation

JERRY BARROWS had recognized Penny instantly. Before she could recover from her surprise at seeing him, he wheeled and left the office by a side door.

Involuntarily, Penny started to follow, but without appearing to do so intentionally, the manager neatly blocked her path.

"A disgruntled employee of mine," he announced blandly. "I've had a great deal of trouble with him. He's a fine workman but difficult to manage."

"What sort of work does he do?" Penny inquired alertly.

The manager was slightly taken aback at the question. He answered evasively:

"Oh, he runs my tow truck and does odd jobs about the garage."

"I've seen him before," Penny remarked. "But

his name has slipped my mind. It's not Jerry Barrows is it?"

The manager scrutinized her intently for a moment. His eyes held a fleeting expression of annoyance and dislike.

"Now I'm sorry but I can't tell you his name," he said apologetically. "I don't know that I ever heard it, although it must be on our pay rolls. Of course, I remember very few of my employees by their names."

Penny and Susan exchanged a quick glance which the manager noted. They were both firmly convinced that Brunner knew the name but did not wish to reveal it.

"Since the boy is an employee of yours, probably I could get his name and address from the pay roll," Penny suggested pointedly.

Brunner hesitated, although only momentarily.

"Why certainly," he said genially. "I'll secure it for you myself. Drop in any time next week and I'll have it for you."

"Couldn't I get it today?" Penny persisted.

"I am afraid that is impossible," Brunner smiled

a trifle coldly. "It is nearly time for me to leave the office now. Did you young ladies wish to see me about another matter?"

Susan recounted her many unpleasant experiences in regard to the newly purchased automobile. The manager listened politely but with increasing frigidity.

"You must have misunderstood me, Miss Altman," he said when she had finished. "We can't undertake to guarantee every car which leaves our shop. As a courtesy to our customers we do occasionally make a few minor repairs free of charge. We have found it impractical to go further than this."

"But in my case, the car has run less than five hundred miles!" Susan protested with growing anger. "It seems to me I'm entitled to service."

"You must see my repair man, Miss Altman. He adjusts all such matters."

"I have seen him, and I've had no satisfaction at all!"

"Then I'm afraid there's nothing more we can do for you."

"Your guarantee means nothing?"

"We stand behind our cars, Miss Altman, but you must have misunderstood my promise to service your new automobile free of charge."

"You said that at the end of five hundred miles my car would receive a complete overhaul!"

"But my dear young lady, you have just received this service."

"Your workman spent less than twenty minutes going over my car."

"Have you driven it since?"

"Well, no, I haven't," Susan admitted reluctantly.

"Then I know you will find everything satisfactory for our workmen are efficient. Good afternoon, Miss Altman."

The manager opened the door in pointed suggestion that the girls leave. Outside in the hall they gave vent to their pent up feelings.

"You were right, Penny," Susan declared angrily. "I should have bought my car at another garage!"

"I never did like that man," Penny added. "He's

such a smooth talker, and yet down under he's mean and selfish. I wonder if Jerry Barrows actually does work for him?"

"He was threatening him when we surprised them in the office."

"I know, and it annoyed Brunner because we saw him talking with the boy at all. I am as sure as anything that he'll never give me his real name or address."

"That's why he suggested that you come back later for it," Susan agreed. "When you return he'll have some other excuse."

"I mean to go back and annoy him just the same. Doesn't it strike you as odd that Jerry would be working for him?"

"Well, perhaps a trifle," Susan said thoughtfully. "But it may be that he hired the boy without inquiring too carefully into his past."

"The fact remains that Brunner was threatening him," Penny pointed out. "It didn't appear to me that it was about any casual matter either."

The girls lowered their voices for they had come within earshot of a garageman who was working

in the repair shop. Susan's car was nearby. After some difficulty she managed to start it, but the engine knocked as badly as before.

"I suppose there's nothing to do but take the car to another garage," Susan said irritably. "I'll never come here again. I know that."

"Let's go for a swim and drown our troubles," Penny suggested. "The Big Dipper will be open."

Since the day had been sultry, the proposal appealed to Susan. They stopped at their homes only long enough to get their bathing suits, and a few minutes later arrived at the picturesque outdoor pool.

Penny found several of her school friends performing at the diving board and soon they were all rounded up for a vigorous game of water polo. After a fierce battle which left everyone exhausted, Penny's side conquered the opponents. The girls sat down on the edge of the pool to rest.

"Isn't that Betty Davis over there under the beach umbrella?" Susan presently inquired, indicating a girl in a black bathing suit who sat alone.

"Why, it is!" Penny agreed. "Shall we go over and speak to her?"

"After the way she treated us this afternoon?"

"We can't be certain she was in the house when we called."

"I think she was," Susan maintained. "She doesn't care for our company, that's all."

"She seemed to like us well enough at first. Betty is the sensitive type, Sue. It may be that she's embarrassed on account of all her father's trouble. I believe I'll swim over and speak to her at any rate."

Penny arose from the side of the pool. Without having appeared to notice the action, Betty Davis hastily left the reclining chair under the umbrella and disappeared into the dressing room.

"I guess you're too late!" Susan laughed. "She saw you first."

Penny sat down again, a trifle nettled.

"You're right, Sue. She's deliberately avoiding us."

"She's a queer sort anyway," Susan said indifferently. "Let's ignore her from now on."

Penny gazed thoughtfully toward the dressing room door.

"There must be some reason for the way she's acting, Sue. I have a notion to corner her in the dressing room so that she'll have to say something to me."

"You're inviting a snub if you do. Forget her, Penny! Come on, I'll race you to the end of the pool!"

She plunged in and Penny reluctantly followed. They swam two lengths and then dived a few times from the high board.

"Oh, let's go home," Penny proposed presently. "I've had enough."

They stood for a few minutes under the cold shower, then entered the dressing room. To their surprise they observed a group of excited girls clustered around the matron's desk.

"I tell you it's my ring!" one of the bathers insisted angrily. "This girl stole it from my locker!"

"It isn't true. The ring is my own. Why, it belonged to my mother."

Penny and Susan pushed their way into the

little group. They had recognized Betty Davis' low pitched voice but were unacquainted with the girl who was accusing her of the theft.

"Let's get to the bottom of this," the matron said severely, turning to the first girl. "Did you have your locker fastened securely?"

"No, that's how she got in. I forgot to lock it. She had the locker next to mine and she must have snatched the ring while I was in the shower."

Betty's face was pale, but with an effort she remained calm as she refuted the charge.

"I don't know anything about this girl's ring. The one I have is my own."

"Give it to me," the matron ordered.

Reluctantly, Betty removed the ring from her finger. It was a white gold band with a cluster of three tiny diamonds. In the act of handing it over, she suddenly changed her mind.

"I'll not give up my own property! This was my mother's engagement ring. And she's dead now."

"Can you prove your story?" the matron questioned.

"You can call my father. Jerome Davis—he is on the police force."

"Yes, but he won't be there long!" the first girl said scornfully. "Everyone knows he's to be let out because of dishonesty. And your brother——"

"Don't you dare say a word against either my father or Jimmie!" Betty cried.

"Girls! Girls!" the matron chided severely. "We'll discuss this matter calmly please."

Penny stepped forward. "I think I may be able to help," she said quietly. "I happen to know that the ring belongs to Betty Davis, for I have seen her wearing it."

"You're a friend of hers," the other girl accused.

"On the contrary, I scarcely know Miss Davis. But I believe in seeing justice done. If you actually lost a similar ring, you may find it on the floor near your locker."

"Have you looked carefully?" the matron questioned.

"Of course I have! The ring is gone and this Davis girl stole it!"

"I'll search your locker myself," the matron decided. "Show me which one it is."

Penny and the others followed to witness the inspection. Article by article, the matron removed everything from the locker, but the ring was not found.

"Wait and I'll sweep the floor," Penny offered.

She ran to find a broom, returning with it a minute later. Carefully she swept the space in the vicinity of the locker.

"You see, it's gone!" the other girl insisted, eyeing Betty Davis furiously. "You'll never find it because *she* is wearing it."

As Penny's broom brushed past a dark corner of the room, there was a little metallic click. She stooped down and picked up a ring. Although it was similar in appearance to the one which Betty wore, the resemblance was not close.

"Is this yours?" she inquired, offering it to the owner of the locker.

"Yes, it is," the girl admitted. "I don't know how it came to be on the floor."

"It was there because you dropped it," the ma-

tron said sternly. "Next time be more careful about accusing persons."

Penny and Susan turned to go to their own lockers, but before they could leave, Betty came toward them timidly.

"Thank you so much," she said in a low tone. "I owe you a great deal."

"Not at all," Penny returned, a trifle stiffly.

"I feel ashamed of the way I have acted lately," the girl went on hurriedly, avoiding Penny's penetrating gaze. "I've been so upset about everything. I wish I could explain—but I can't."

"I think perhaps I understand."

Betty stared hard at Penny. But she quickly masked the fleeting expression of alarm. After thanking her friends again, she turned and disappeared in the direction of the hair drying room.

"Just what is it that upsets that girl so?" Penny said in an undertone to Susan as they went to their own lockers. "She acts as if she's afraid we'll discover something about her."

"Yes, she does. I can't figure it out at all."

The girls quickly dressed but by the time they had dried their hair and were ready for the street, it was long past supper time.

"I had no idea it was so late," Susan declared as they hurried toward the parked automobile. "Mother will be worried for fear something has happened to us."

"You might telephone."

"It would take me ages to find a 'phone. I'll be home in a minute or two now anyway."

It had grown quite dark, but although automobiles had been parked close together near the swimming pool, the girls experienced little difficulty in locating Susan's car. As they came up to it they observed that a garage service truck had drawn up to an automobile only a short distance away. The uniformed garage man was busy changing a wheel.

"Some poor fellow had a flat," Susan said sympathetically. "Strange I didn't pick up the nail instead. My luck must be changing."

Penny had paused to survey the service car more critically. The garage man, aware that he

was under scrutiny, gave her a sharp glance. Then abruptly he threw his tools into a bag, jumped into his truck and drove away, leaving his work unfinished.

"Quick! See if you can get the license number!" Penny cried.

"I can't. The car is too far away."

"I got the last three numbers," Penny informed with satisfaction. "—684. I want to write it down before I forget."

Susan supplied pencil and paper from her purse. Penny jotted down the number.

"Why did you want it?" Susan asked curiously. "You don't think that man was trying to steal a wheel?"

"I certainly do. Otherwise why would he have left so hurriedly when we came up? See, the wheel is only half changed."

They walked over to the nearby automobile to look. The wheel obviously was a new one and apparently had not been damaged.

"That man was a tire thief all right," Penny announced. "It means that the Molberg gang is start-

ing activities again. I must get in touch with Father immediately."

"I'll take you straight home," Susan offered.

"If I'd been just a little quicker I'd have caught the entire license number," Penny said regretfully. "Even so, it may be possible to trace the car."

Returning to their own automobile, they drove rapidly toward the Nichols home.

CHAPTER XV

Incriminating Evidence

PENNY found her father occupied at his desk in the study. Recounting her experience at the Big Dipper, she offered him the license number which she had copied.

"I don't suppose it will be of any use to you since I failed to get the entire number."

"I may be able to trace the car though I rather doubt it," Mr. Nichols told her. "At any rate, from what you've seen tonight I feel confident that Rap Molberg is shipping another truck load of stolen wheels out of town. I'll tip off the police to be on the lookout."

Some months previously the detective had installed a private wire which connected him directly with the police station. He used it now to talk confidentially with the police commissioner.

"I must go downtown at once," he informed Penny regretfully after making the call. "Don't

wait up for me. I probably won't return until late."

At midnight Mr. Nichols had not come home. Penny, after dozing for some hours in the big easy chair, went off to bed. Not until morning at the breakfast table did she learn of the night's activities.

"As usual we failed to make a capture," the detective acknowledged gloomily. "The police bottled up all the main highways leading from the city. All suspicious trucks were searched. We thought certain we'd catch Molberg with the goods, but he was just a little too smart for us again."

"Were many wheels stolen last night?" Penny inquired curiously.

"A good truck load at least. This case has begun to make me look like an amateur. If I don't begin to close in on the Molberg gang soon I'll be the laughing stock of the city."

"You'll solve the case," Penny smiled confidently.

"I'm not so sure of that. You see, while Molberg

is a daring crook, the evidence indicates that he is merely a go-between for a far more clever criminal. A master mind plans out every move that the gang makes, yet doubtlessly that person has never been under suspicion. Such a man always takes care to keep within the law himself although he engineers the most daring crimes by means of his henchmen."

"And of course they take all the risk."

"Yes, if his gang is broken up, he merely organizes another."

"Have you no clue as to where this so called 'master mind' may be?"

"None whatsoever. He has kept his hand well hidden. We have made a few arrests but the men can't be made to talk. It may be that they aren't even aware of his identity."

"I don't suppose you've ever been able to get any evidence against that place where Susan bought the stolen wheel," Penny ventured.

"No, nothing of value. The owner has a very bad name. No doubt he is receiving stolen goods, but it is always hard to prove anything."

Penny relapsed into a thoughtful silence which she presently ended by saying:

"You know, Dad, a peculiar thing happened yesterday. I don't suppose it could have the slightest connection with the case and yet it set me to thinking."

"What was that?" Mr. Nichols asked smilingly.

"I saw George Brunner talking with Jerry Barrows in his office."

"That young protégé of yours?"

"He isn't any longer," Penny retorted. "I realize now that I was deceived by his story. But why should he be working for Mr. Brunner?"

"That can be explained easily. I suppose Brunner didn't take the trouble to check up his record."

"He was threatening the boy," Penny reported, her eyebrows puckering into a frown. "I distinctly heard him say: 'You'll do as I tell you or—' Then he saw me and broke off."

"You're certain that was what he said?"

"Of course I am! You don't think I imagined it, I hope!"

"No," Mr. Nichols laughed, "but one's ears

often distort conversation. It does seem a little odd that Brunner should have any connection with this boy. Still, there must be a logical explanation. Brunner's reputation is above reproach, you know."

"I don't think he's so very honest," Penny declared. "After the way he acted about Susan's car I wouldn't trust him an inch."

"Brunner does make glib promises," the detective admitted. "In general, however, he seems to have operated his business honestly. He has made a great deal of money, Penny, and is considered one of Belton City's leading citizens."

"I don't see where he makes all his money," Penny complained. "Whenever you go into his garage it's usually deserted, although he keeps a horde of discourteous workmen."

"Brunner hasn't been doing so well of late," Mr. Nichols agreed.

"I think he'd bear watching," Penny said darkly.

"I'll turn the task over to you," Mr. Nichols chuckled. "I shouldn't care for it myself. Digging up the black history of influential citizens isn't

the most profitable occupation in the world."

Realizing that she was being teased, Penny dropped the subject. However, no sooner had her father buried himself in his newspaper again than she thought of another question which she could not resist asking.

"What did you learn about that license number I gave you last night, Dad?"

"It was issued in this county. Without the complete number it will be impossible to trace the car."

Mr. Nichols again turned to his newspaper and Penny permitted him to read undisturbed. She knew that he regarded her interest in the Molberg case with amusement. He was humoring her in her desire to play at being a detective. But while he listened politely to her questions and suggestions, he did not really believe that her contributions were of great value.

"I wish I could show him!" Penny thought determinedly. "Maybe I shall too!"

Mr. Nichols, blissfully unaware of what his daughter was thinking, left the breakfast table.

"I'll be out of the city all day," he informed. "I may get back late tonight but I can't be sure of it. I guess you'll be well looked after by Mrs. Gallup."

"And by Joe," Penny added. "Must he always trail me around, Dad? I'm getting so tired of it."

Mr. Nichols smiled broadly.

"From Joe's daily reports, I suspected he was the one who was growing tired. You seem to have led him a rapid-fire chase. He turned in a bill for nearly forty gallons of gasoline last week."

"He must be drinking it then!" Penny retorted. "I'm sure my old car couldn't have traveled any such distance. But seriously, can't you discharge him?"

"Not until the case is finished, Penny."

"And when will that be?"

"I wish I knew. If all cases were as annoying as this one, I'd soon be out of business. But we have several new leads. I'm hoping something will develop within the next week."

"I may do a little sleuthing of my own just to hurry matters along," Penny warned with a laugh.

"Go as far as you like," Mr. Nichols said, undis-

turbed. "I depend upon Joe to see that you don't get into too hot water."

After her father had left the house, Penny went to the Y.W.C.A. where she taught a Friday morning swimming class. By eleven o'clock she was through her work and had the entire day before her.

Making her way to the business section of the city, she did a little shopping at one of the department stores. As she was buying a pair of gloves, she heard her name spoken. Turning, she found Betty Davis standing beside her.

"I saw you from across the aisle," the girl smiled. "I was just starting home." She hesitated, then said hurriedly: "I don't suppose you'd care to take luncheon with me?"

"Why, I'd love it," Penny responded instantly.

"I'm not much of a cook," Betty confessed modestly, "but I can always scare up a sandwich or so."

Penny welcomed an opportunity to visit the Davis home again for despite Betty's peculiar actions, she felt that the girl really liked her. As they

boarded a street car, it occurred to her that she had been invited for a particular purpose. The girl grew inceasingly ill at ease. Conversation became difficult although Penny made a special effort to be agreeable.

Not until luncheon had been served and the dishes washed, did Betty bring up the matter which had been troubling her.

"I'm worried about Father," she confessed. "The truth is, he's in danger of losing his position and through no fault of his own."

Penny remained silent and the girl went on with increasing embarrassment.

"I don't know how to say it—you've been so kind to me. But I was wondering—do you think Mr. Nichols might be induced to intercede in behalf of my father?"

"I'll speak to him about it," Penny promised, "but I think perhaps it would be better if your father talked with him personally——"

"Oh, no," Betty said hastily, "he'd never do that! You see, he doesn't know that I have said anything to you. I'm sure he wouldn't like it."

"I see," Penny responded quietly. "I'll talk with Father, but I am afraid it will do no good."

Betty's shoulders slumped, although she tried to smile bravely.

"I shouldn't have made the request. Please forget it."

"No, I mean to talk to Father about it," Penny insisted.

"It's very kind of you. I'd never have mentioned the matter at all only I realize my father will never turn a hand to defend himself against unjust accusations."

The conversation shifted to less personal subjects. As Penny arose to leave a half hour later she spoke casually of Betty's brother and was surprised to notice a strained expression pass over the girl's face.

"You were going to show me his picture the other day when I was here," she reminded Betty.

"Oh, yes, so I was," the other agreed but without enthusiasm. "Jimmie is very good looking. I guess I told you he was a football player at Waltham High last year."

"I'd like to meet him," Penny remarked.

"Jimmie isn't home very much of the time," Betty returned hastily.

"But at least I can see his picture," Penny said, watching the girl closely.

"Why, yes," Betty stammered, ill at ease. "I'll get it."

She went into an adjoining room and did not return for some minutes. She did not bring the photograph. Avoiding Penny's gaze, she said apologetically:

"I can't seem to find it anywhere. I must have misplaced the photo."

"It doesn't matter," Penny returned politely.

She had guessed instantly that Betty had made no real effort to find the photograph. For some reason the girl no longer wished her to see it.

After chatting for a short while longer, Penny took her leave.

"Now I wonder why Betty was so reluctant to have me see the picture," she reflected as she walked slowly toward the street car line. "I'm more interested in it now than I was before."

It occurred to Penny that if only she could find a copy of the previous year's Waltham High School annual, Jimmie Davis' picture was almost certain to appear in it.

"Margery Barclay's brother attended that school," she recalled. "I might be able to get an annual from him. It won't be out of my way to stop at their house on my way home."

When she called at the Barclay residence, Mrs. Barclay answered the door. Upon learning that neither Margery nor her brother were at home, Penny mentioned the purpose of her call.

"Why, yes, we have one of the annuals," Mrs. Barclay told her. "I am sure you are very welcome to have it for a few days. I'll find it for you."

She went to the bookcase and after searching through several shelves found a thick, dusty volume which she gave to Penny.

"I'll bring it back tomorrow, Mrs. Barclay."

"Keep it as long as you like. No one ever looks at it any more."

Penny thanked Mrs. Barclay, and tucking the book under her arm, walked slowly toward the

street car line. While she stood at the corner waiting, she turned a few of the pages.

"After I get home I'll go through the annual systematically," she decided.

A street car stopped at the corner and she boarded it. Seating herself near the rear, she again interested herself in the book. Although she found many photographs of football stars, she did not immediately locate the one for which she searched.

Then she turned a page and a face stood out. Beneath it, a caption gave the name of Jimmie Davis and a list of his scholastical achievements. Penny stared at the picture in disbelief.

"No wonder Betty acted as she did!" she told herself excitedly. "Now I understand perfectly why she didn't want me to see the photograph!"

CHAPTER XVI

A Valuable Photograph

CONVINCED that she had made an important discovery, Penny hastily left the street car. Catching one which was going in the opposite direction, she went directly to her father's main downtown office.

"Has Dad left town yet?" she inquired of Miss Arrow.

"Yes, I think he has," the secretary informed. "At least he left here nearly an hour ago and said he likely wouldn't return today."

Thinking that possibly Mr. Nichols might have stopped for a few minutes at his temporary office opposite the Brunner garage, Penny went there. She found the room closed though not locked.

"I don't know what to do now," Penny thought, slightly bewildered. "It seems to me I have a valuable clue which should be acted upon at once."

She considered taking Miss Arrow or one of

her father's detectives into her confidence, yet hesitated to do so lest she make herself appear ridiculous. After all, she had no real evidence upon which to base her theory. Even though the photograph of Jimmie Davis had given her a start, she could not be certain that she knew anything damaging concerning the boy's past. It would be wise to move cautiously.

"I'll say nothing about the photograph until I've had an opportunity to do a little investigating of my own," she decided. "I may as well start by asking Jerome Davis a few questions."

Penny was familiar with the policeman's regular beat, but before trying to locate him, she went home for her car. It was Mrs. Gallup's afternoon off, so there was no need to explain to the housekeeper where she was going.

"I might leave a note where she'll find it when she returns," Penny thought. "Still, I should be back by supper time."

As Penny backed from the garage, she caught a glimpse of Joe Franey's familiar black coupe parked across the street.

"I'm afraid Dad's gasoline bill will take a big jump upward today," she chuckled.

Penny dismissed the detective from her mind and became intent upon the problem which faced her. She must be very cautious if she questioned Jerome Davis for it might ruin all her plans if he suspected what she was about.

Approaching the policeman's usual haunts, Penny slowed down. Presently she caught sight of the officer at a street corner. He was talking with someone.

"Why, it's Jerry Barrows!" she exclaimed, pulling up at the curbing to watch. "The plot thickens!"

Penny made no attempt to interrupt the two. The policeman was talking so earnestly with the boy that he had not even glanced in her direction. She was too far away to hear what they were saying, but she observed Jerome Davis take a small roll of bills from his pocket. He peeled off three and gave them to the youth. The latter thanked him and moved quickly away.

"I can't question Mr. Davis now or he would

be suspicious," Penny thought. "I'll come back a little later."

Recalling that she had never visited the Brunner garage to request Jerry Barrows' address from the manager, she made that her next stop. As she parked outside the building, she noticed that Joe Franey, faithful to his trust, was still following.

"Poor man, he must think I am completely crazy," Penny laughed. "Perhaps I am too!"

Upon requesting to see Mr. Brunner, she was informed that he was busy. She was forced to wait nearly three-quarters of an hour before he would see her.

"What can I do for you, Miss Nichols?" he inquired with forced politeness as she entered.

Penny reminded him of his promise.

"Oh, yes!" He laughed apologetically. "You know, the matter completely slipped my mind until this minute."

"Indeed?" Penny inquired. She had not been surprised at the answer.

"If you will come back in a few days——"

"Can't you get the address for me now? It is

rather important that I have it immediately."

The manager frowned. "I'll see what I can do. Wait here."

He left the office, returning a few minutes later.

"I can't seem to find it on our records at all, Miss Nichols. The boy never worked here steadily. In fact, he has been discharged."

"So you refuse to give me the address?"

"It isn't that, Miss Nichols. We'd be glad to provide it if we could. Unfortunately, we can't."

"I see," Penny returned coldly.

She left the garage and went back to her car. For a time she sat thinking. She could not make up her mind as to her next move.

While she sat debating, George Brunner came out of the building. Without noticing Penny, he climbed into his automobile, one of the latest and most expensive models available, and drove away.

"I wonder where he's going in such a hurry?" Penny asked herself.

She decided that it might be worth her time to follow. Quickly, she shifted gears and took after him.

Without being aware that anyone was trailing him, the garage manager weaved from one street to another, gradually traveling toward the poorer section of the city. Penny had difficulty in keeping him in sight.

"What a silly thing I am doing," she told herself. "I think I'll sign off and go home."

However, she could not resist following the car a few more blocks. Her patience was rewarded. Presently Brunner turned into South Lake Street.

"I'll keep on a little farther," Penny decided. "It may be that Brunner is perfectly honest and above board, but I have my doubts. I think he'll bear watching."

She was not greatly surprised when the garage manager halted his car only a short distance from the tire shop which she and Susan had visited only a few days previously. Penny drew up to the curbing on the opposite side of the street.

As Brunner alighted and looked carefully about to see that he was unobserved, Penny ducked down out of sight, pretending to be fixing something on the floor of the car.

Straightening up a minute later, she saw that the garage manager was making his way toward the tire shop.

"Now what does he want there?" she asked herself. "I must say he isn't keeping very good company."

Brunner entered the shop and Penny settled herself to wait. An hour passed. It began to grow dark.

"I really should telephone Mrs. Gallup that I'll be late for supper," Penny reflected. "Either that or I should give up this silly chase and go home."

In her heart she did not really think that it was silly. The conviction had steadily grown in her mind that in some way the garage owner was involved with Jerry Barrows and others in a questionable business activity.

Noticing a drug store nearby, she stepped inside to telephone her home. After several rings, the operator informed her that no one answered.

"Mrs. Gallup must have been detained," Penny thought. "I'll not need to hurry home now."

As she was leaving the drug store, the door of the tire shop on the opposite side of the street opened and George Brunner emerged. Penny hastily dodged back into the doorway to avoid being seen.

Brunner walked directly to his car, preparing to depart. Before he could start the motor, the owner of the shop came running after him. It was the same man who had spoken so harshly to Penny upon her previous visit.

The two men conversed in low tones for several minutes, but as they became more excited, their voices grew louder.

"It's too dangerous I tell you," she heard the owner of the tire shop say. "The police are getting wise. And only a day or so ago Nichols sent his daughter around here to spy."

"I'll deal with her," Brunner promised. "She's getting too curious for her own good."

"After tonight I'm through," the other insisted. "The little I make isn't worth the risk I take."

Penny could not hear Brunner's reply. He seemed to be arguing with the tire shop owner.

She felt elated and excited at the information she had gleaned.

After tonight! The words burned into her mind. What coup were the two men planning for that evening? If only she might learn!

Could it be that Brunner was involved in the auto accessory thefts? It was generally believed that the disreputable owner of the tire shop made a practice of receiving stolen goods. Why then, should a man in Brunner's position stoop to have dealings with such a person unless he too were guilty?

The evidence against the two was purely circumstantial, that Penny plainly realized. It seemed ridiculous to connect Brunner with the underworld and yet the very fact that no suspicion had ever been attached to him offered a measure of safety for his dishonorable activities.

"Dad warned me that one must move cautiously in trying to gather evidence against influential citizens," Penny reasoned. "Yet, if I wait until I can talk it over with him, it may be too late."

Brunner's automobile was moving away from

the curbing. Penny did not have a minute to debate. The instant that the tire shop owner vanished inside his store, she darted to her own car.

Already Brunner was far up the street, but by speeding she managed to approach close enough to keep him within sight.

"Perhaps I'd better take Joe into my confidence," she thought a trifle uneasily. "There's no telling where this chase may end."

She glanced back, but the detective's familiar black coupe was not in view. Nor did she see it when she looked again a few blocks farther on.

"I've lost him somewhere," she told herself in annoyance. "If that isn't my luck! Just when I might have used him to advantage!"

Penny soon discovered that George Brunner was returning to his own garage. As he drove into the building she drew up at the curbing, puzzled as to how she could shadow him further.

Then it occurred to her that she was directly opposite her father's office. From there it would be a simple matter to keep watch of the Brunner garage without attracting attention to her own actions.

Before taking up her station in the little room high above the street, Penny fortified herself with several sandwiches and a bottle of milk purchased at a cafe nearby. Then she was ready for her vigil.

An hour passed and nothing happened. There was little activity at the Brunner garage. Several motorists stopped at the red pump for gasoline, but that was all.

"Perhaps my hunch was wrong," Penny thought as she grew tired of waiting. "I really haven't much reason for being suspicious of Brunner."

After a time she used her father's telephone to call home. No one answered. Obviously, Mrs. Gallup had not returned.

"I wonder what detained her," Penny mused. "It isn't like her to stay away."

She remained at her seat by the window. Several times she was tempted to pick up a magazine and read for a few minutes. She resisted the impulse, remembering that she had heard her father say that a good investigator never took his eye from the place or person he was watching.

Another hour dragged by. Penny grew tired and

bored. It was a warm night and the tiny room had become oppressive.

"I'll wait a little while longer," she decided.

Penny ate the last of her sandwiches and wished that she had bought coffee instead of milk. It would have helped her to stay awake.

Suddenly she became alert. A man stood in the doorway of the Brunner garage alley entrance. She did not need her father's field glass to see that it was the manager. He looked at his watch, then cast a glance up and down the street.

Penny studied her own wrist watch. It was exactly ten o'clock.

A garage service car rolled swiftly down the street. It swerved into the alley.

Simultaneously, Brunner swung wide the rear doors of the garage. The truck drove in, but not before Penny had riveted her eyes upon the license number.

At sight of the last three figures, her heart leaped. The numbers—684—were identical with those she had noted upon the license of the service car at the Big Dipper!

CHAPTER XVII

Under the Canvas

"IT BEGINS to look as if my hunch might be correct," Penny told herself. "Unless that truck merely drove into the garage for gasoline or service, things look suspicious!"

She saw Brunner follow the car into the building, carefully closing the doors.

"If everything is honest and above board, why did they use the alley entrance when the other one is far more convenient?" she reflected. "Obviously, Brunner knew the car was coming at exactly ten o'clock too."

Convinced that she was on the verge of important discoveries, Penny settled herself for a long wait. From her chair by the window she could watch both the alley and the main entrance.

A half hour elapsed, then another. At length Penny's patience was rewarded. The alley doors swung open and a heavy truck which was covered

over with a canvas top, emerged. The driver wore a cap and his head was bent low. In the semi-darkness of the dimly lighted street Penny could not catch even a glimpse of his face.

"I must follow that truck!" she thought tensely. "If Dad were here he would do it I feel sure! It's the only chance to gain real evidence!"

She waited at the window only long enough to see that the car had turned down Center Avenue. Scribbling a brief message to her father explaining what she intended to do, she left the note where he would find it in the event he returned to the office that night. Then she raced to the street.

By the time she had her roadster started the covered truck had disappeared. However, turning down Center Avenue, Penny caught it at the first traffic light. Satisfied that she would have no trouble in keeping it in view, she slowed down, falling back to a distance which was not likely to arouse suspicion.

Penny had no idea where the chase would lead, although the truck seemed to be driving directly out of the city. From the slow rate of speed at

which it traveled, she thought that it must be heavily loaded with cargo.

"If I only knew what was hidden under that canvas cover I might have the solution to the mystery," she reflected. "I think I have it anyway, but I must secure definite evidence."

Penny was fully aware that she had launched herself upon a dangerous enterprise. In some manner Joe Franey had lost track of her completely, and she could no longer count upon his protection. In an emergency she must depend entirely upon her own resources.

Before Penny had traveled many miles out of the city she began to grow alarmed because her gasoline gauge showed that she had scarcely a gallon left. Although she had her purse with her, it contained only a dollar. She could buy about five gallons of fuel, but should the truck lead her much farther into the country, she easily might find herself stranded.

Apparently, the driver ahead faced a similar need for gasoline. At the next filling station he turned in.

Penny determined upon a bold move. At the risk of detection, she too drove into the station.

"This will give me just the opportunity I need to get a good look at that driver!" she thought.

The truck had pulled up alongside of one of the three pumps but as Penny stopped in the shadow where the light from the filling station office would not shine fully upon her, she was disappointed to see that the driver's seat was empty.

"He's gone off somewhere," she told herself. "If only I could be sure he'd be away for a minute or two, I'd peep under that canvas cover and see what it is he's hauling."

Before she could transfer the thought into action, a filling station attendant came to serve her.

"How many?" he inquired.

"Three gallons," Penny said.

While the attendant operated the pump, she looked searchingly about. The driver of the truck was talking with someone inside the office, but his back was turned so that she could not see his face.

"Sixty-three cents," the attendant informed politely. "Shall I look at your oil?"

"It's all right I think," Penny responded, offering the money. The man went inside for change.

"This is my only chance!" Penny told herself.

Like a flash she was out of the roadster. She moved swiftly to the back of the truck, cast a quick glance toward the office, and seeing that she was unobserved, lifted a corner of the canvas cover.

The truck was loaded with automobile wheels.

A sound from the direction of the filling station office caused Penny to wheel.The driver was coming back!

She dropped the canvas flap and melted back into the shadow. She pretended to busy herself with the radiator cap of her own car.

"Everything okay, sir?" the station attendant asked, emerging from the office and addressing the truck driver.

"Yes, what do I owe?"

Penny started as she heard the voice. It was strangely familiar. If only she could see the driver's face!

"Three-forty-two," the attendant informed the trucker, in response to his question.

The driver gave him a bill and waited for his change. For the first time he turned toward Penny. She hastily averted her face, yet looked over her shoulder an instant later to view his.

"It's Jerry Barrows!" she recognized. "Now I understand in what capacity he was employed by Brunner!"

The attendant had returned with the driver's change and likewise her own. He noticed that she had removed the radiator cap from the roadster.

"Need water?" he questioned pleasantly.

"Please," Penny said, very low.

At the sound of her voice, Jerry Barrows turned, but he saw nothing more than Penny's back. Apparently satisfied that he had never seen the girl before, he climbed into his truck.

The attendant had peered down into the radiator of Penny's car.

"It's full to the top," he reported.

"Why, so it is," Penny acknowledged with a self-conscious laugh. "I guess I didn't look very well."

She stepped into the roadster but spent several

minutes putting away her change and starting the motor. She did not wish to pull away from the station until after Jerry Barrows had left.

"I intend to find out where he's taking those stolen wheels before I turn back," she decided grimly.

After a seemingly interminable delay, the boy started his truck and pulled out of the station. Penny waited a few minutes longer and then followed.

For some time they traveled over a wide, national highway but presently the truck driver turned into a dirt road which wound in and out through the low hills. Several times Penny was forced to stop her car and wait by the roadside lest she draw too close to the vehicle ahead.

The trail led through a dense forest. Farm houses became farther and farther apart. After awhile they crossed a river, and directly beyond Penny noticed an odd wooden structure which appeared to be a rebuilt sawmill.

The truck turned into a narrow lane which led to the old building. Penny hesitated to follow lest

the driver discover that he was being shadowed. She parked her car in a clump of bushes just off the road. Since leaving the main highway she had traveled without headlights.

The truck drew up near the sawmill. Penny could hear the roar of the powerful engine and see the headlight beam. Then the lights were switched off and the sound of the motor became muffled.

"He's driven inside the building," she decided. "Unless I get in there somehow, I'll never discover what is going on."

Penny debated, but in the end curiosity conquered fear. She left the roadster and stealthily made her way toward the sawmill.

CHAPTER XVIII

At the Old Sawmill

FROM the outside, Penny could not have told that the old mill was in use. It was surrounded by unkempt trees and shrubs which hid it from the road. Cracks in the decaying boards had been carefully patched so that no light from inside could show through.

Keeping behind the bushes, Penny made a complete tour of the building. She could find no means of entrance other than the main double doors through which the truck had driven. Only after a second minute inspection did she notice a small window at the rear well above the level of her head.

"If I can get up there I might be able to see what is going on inside," she thought.

Even on tiptoe she could not reach the window. Going down to the river she found an old orange crate which had washed up on the bank. Carrying

it back to the window she set it underneath and climbed up.

She peered into the building. The window opened directly into a dark, deserted little room, but directly beyond she could observe several men moving about. It was impossible to see what they were doing.

Thinking that perhaps she might overhear their conversation, she pried at the window. To her surprise it was readily raised.

But she could hear only a low murmur of voices. It was impossible to distinguish a single phrase.

"I might just as well be a million miles away as here," she told herself. "I have a notion to climb inside."

Penny took after her father in that she seldom experienced the sensation of fear. She knew well enough that she was taking a grave risk in entering the building, yet if she were to learn anything which would aid Mr. Nichols in his case against the automobile accessory thieves, she must be courageous.

Naturally agile, Penny raised herself to the ledge by sheer strength of her arms. She hesitated an instant, then dropped lightly down inside the sawmill.

She moved a few steps forward, then returned to quietly close the window. While it cut off her escape, she realized that the open window would be a telltale sign should anyone notice it.

She crept toward the adjoining main room from whence came the low murmur of voices. Secreting herself behind a tall pile of old sawed boards, she peered through the doorway.

The truck had pulled up at one side of the room. Several rough looking men were engaged in unloading the wheels. Penny's eyes fastened upon the man who directed the others. It was Rap Molberg.

"Get a move on!" he ordered tersely. "We can't stall around all night."

The wheels were trundled out one by one from the rear end of the truck, and the men, six in all, fell to work with their tools, defacing the serial numbers and substituting others. Penny watched in fascination.

Her gaze wandered to Jerry Barrows who had driven the truck to the sawmill. He sat apart, apparently taking no interest in what was going on.

Somewhere in the building a telephone rang. As one of the men came toward her, Penny shrank down behind the pile of lumber. He passed so close that she could have reached out and touched him had she chosen.

The man went into a small anteroom and Penny heard him answer the telephone. She could not distinguish the words, but presently he returned to the main room.

"It was the big boss" he reported to Rap Molberg. "He called from Somm Center."

"What's he doing there?" Rap demanded irritably. "Doesn't he think I'm capable of handling this end?"

"He's on his way here now," the other informed. "He says he has a hot tip that Christopher Nichols is wise to our hideout!"

"That snooper!" Molberg snarled. "I should have known he was up to something when he left town so suddenly."

"The cops may be down on us any minute."

"Then we're getting out of here without leaving any evidence behind!" Molberg snapped. "Get busy men!"

All fell to work with a will save Jerry Barrows.

"You!" Rap shouted angrily. "This is no time for loafing!"

"I agreed to drive a truck, but I didn't say I'd deface tires and help with your thieving!" the boy retorted bitterly. "I'm sick and tired of the whole deal."

"Oh, so you're sick and tired of it, are you?" the other echoed sarcastically. "You're in this the same as the rest of us, and if we go to the pen, you go with us! Now get to work or I'll——"

He left the threat unsaid, for just then an automobile engine was heard outside the building. Everyone froze in an attitude of listening. Molberg dropped his tools and ran to peer out through a tiny peep-hole in the wall.

"It's all right," he said in relief. "It's the boss. He must have burned up the road getting here from Somm Center."

The wide doors were flung open and a high-powered motor car drove into the building. George Brunner alighted.

"There's no time to waste," he informed tersely. "Load up those wheels and get them out of here!"

"We haven't finished defacing the numbers," Molberg told him.

"We can't stop for that. The important thing is to get this place cleared of evidence before the police pounce down on us."

Quickly the wheels which had been unloaded were stacked back into the truck. Brunner turned sharply upon Jerry Barrows.

"There's your load!" he snapped. "Get going with it!"

The boy made no move to obey.

"Did you hear?" Brunner snarled.

"I heard," Jerry Barrows retorted coldly, "but I'm not driving that truck out of here tonight. I'm through!"

"We'll see about that!" Brunner came toward him menacingly.

The boy cringed in terror but stood his ground.

"I've been thinking it over," he said determinedly. "I'd rather go to jail than keep on as I have. I've driven my last truck load of stolen wheels!"

Brunner caught him roughly by the shoulder.

"You're yellow!" he sneered. "But I know how to handle your kind. I'll just let your father hear that his son has become a thief! How will you like that?"

All color had drained from the boy's face. In the light from the workmen's torches, it appeared almost ghostly.

"You know it will just about kill my father if he learns the truth!"

"Then you'll do as I say!"

The boy hesitated, seemingly almost on the verge of giving in. Then he threw back his head defiantly.

"No, I've made up my mind! I'm through for good!"

"That's your final decision?"

"It is."

Without warning, Brunner's fist shot out. He

struck the boy squarely under the chin. Jerry Barrows' knees crumpled beneath him and he sagged to the floor.

Brunner turned to the others who stood watching.

"Anyone here who feels the same way?"

No one spoke.

"Then back to your work!" Brunner commanded. "Clear the building of every scrap of evidence."

Penny was horrified at the scene she had witnessed. Jerry Barrows lay so motionless upon the floor that she was afraid he had been seriously injured. She longed to go to his aid, yet dared not make a move lest she betray her presence.

"If only I could get word to the police or to Father!" she thought tensely. "By the time I drive back to Belton City for help it will be too late."

The telephone! If she could but reach the antechamber it might be possible to notify the authorities.

Watching her chance, she tiptoed across the open space to the little room. The men were so oc-

cupied with their work that they did not glance in her direction. No sound betrayed her.

Penny reached the chamber in safety, and quietly closed the door. It was dark inside and at first she could not locate the telephone. But after groping about, she found it on the wall.

"I'll try Father's office," she decided. "There's just a chance that he may have returned."

Her hand trembled as she took down the receiver. She was fully aware of the risk she was taking in attempting the telephone call.

Muffling her voice and speaking very low, she gave the number of her father's office to the operator. There was a long wait. She could hear a rhythmical buzz on the wire. The bell was ringing but no one answered.

"I must try the police," Penny thought.

Just then she heard a click at the other end of the line. A receiver had been taken from its hook.

"Hello, Christopher Nichols speaking," acknowledged the familiar voice of her father.

In her excitement, Penny began an almost incoherent outpouring of what she had witnessed.

"You say you've seen the tire thieves at work?" Mr. Nichols demanded.

"Yes, bring the police, and they can be trapped with the evidence! But hurry or it will be too late!"

"Where are you now, Penny?" her father questioned tensely.

"At the old sawmill. Take the road——"

A slight sound directly behind caused Penny to turn her head. Rap Molberg stood in the doorway!

CHAPTER XIX

Trapped

BEFORE Penny could utter a sound, the man sprang toward her. A grimy hand was clapped roughly against her mouth and the telephone receiver jerked from her hand.

"Well, if it isn't the little Nichols girl!" the man leered, shoving her away from the 'phone. "Trying to bring the police down on us, were you?"

Penny could make no retort. Instead she savagely bit his hand.

With a cry of rage and pain, Molberg jerked it away. Penny sprang for the door.

The man leaped after her, catching her by the shoulder. He pressed her back against the wall.

"No more of your little tricks," he warned.

From his pocket he drew forth a stout cord. Although Penny struggled, she could not prevent him from tying her hands behind her back. He took out a large handkerchief.

"Not a gag!" Penny pleaded.

"I suppose you'd like to make another telephone call," the man said sarcastically. "I'm going to fix you so you won't make any more trouble tonight!"

The handkerchief was tied tightly across her mouth and her feet were securely trussed. Then Molberg placed her with her back against the wall and left her alone.

Almost immediately he returned with Brunner. The two had brought a light.

"This is luck!" the garage manager declared, his eyes sparkling. "With Christopher Nichols' daughter in our hands I guess that snooper won't make us any more trouble. Did she get through to the police, do you think?"

"I doubt it. She had just begun to talk on the 'phone when I caught her," Rap informed.

"We'll take no chance anyway. We're getting out of here as quickly as we can."

The two men went away, taking the light with them. Penny was left alone in the dark. She twisted and turned but could not succeed in loosening her bonds. The gag became uncomfortable.

"What a mess I've made of things now," she told herself in disgust. "Here I am a prisoner, and there isn't a chance Dad or the police will get to me in time. If only I could have explained where I was before Rap Molberg caught me!"

Penny tried not to think of the possible fate which awaited her. Brunner would never permit her to go free. She had gleaned too much valuable information and would prove a damaging witness against him. She knew now that he alone directed the activities of the so-called Molberg gang. Brunner was the arch criminal, the "master mind" which had baffled police and private investigators. Rap Molberg, although a dangerous crook, merely carried out his chief's orders.

"Brunner fooled everyone with his posing as a substantial citizen," Penny mused. "All the time he was using his business as a front to hide his unlawful activities."

Outside, in the main part of the sawmill, she could hear men working feverishly. In a few minutes the big truck would depart with all the evidence which could not be destroyed. Penny won-

dered if she would be left tied up in the little room or taken along.

Again she struggled to free herself but only succeeded in drawing the knots tighter. The gag was so tight across her mouth that she could utter no sound. Spent from her effort to escape, she leaned back against the wall.

Presently her eyes riveted upon the closed door. Was it imagination or had it opened a tiny crack? Distinctly, she could notice a widening streak of light.

She waited expectantly. Noiselessly, the door swung back on its hinges. At first Penny could not see who it was that had come in. But as he moved toward her, she recognized Jerry Barrows.

"Don't be afraid," he told her in a whisper. "I've come to help you."

Penny was relieved to know that the boy had not been seriously injured by the blow he had received from Brunner. She tried to speak but could not.

Quickly, he bent and untied the cloth about her mouth.

"Why are you doing this?" Penny whispered.

"Because you helped me once when I was in trouble," the boy told her instantly. "Besides, I hate Brunner."

"He has forced you to continue in crime against your will?"

"Yes."

"Your real name is not Jerry Barrows," Penny stated.

The boy paused in untying the cords about her wrists.

"No, that isn't my own name," he admitted.

"You are Jimmie Davis," Penny accused.

The boy stared. "How did you know?"

"From a photograph."

"You haven't told my father?" he demanded nervously.

"No, I've said nothing of it to anyone. But I think the only way out for you is to make a clean breast of everything."

"I mean to tell the truth if I ever get away from here alive."

"You'll testify against Brunner and Molberg?" Penny questioned eagerly.

"Yes, if we can manage to escape. The main door is guarded."

"I came in through a window," Penny told him. "Perhaps we can get out the same way."

The instant her bonds had been cut, she sprang to her feet. They moved noiselessly to the door. Jimmie opened it a crack, then closed it hastily. Penny could hear footsteps.

"It's Brunner!" the boy whispered. "I think he suspects."

They braced themselves against the door. The knob turned slowly. Then a man's weight was hurled against the panel.

"Open that door!" Brunner shouted furiously. "Open or I'll break it down."

There was no escape from the room for it was without windows. Penny and her companion held the door as long as they could, but when Rap Molberg had come in response to his chief's call, the result was inevitable. A panel splintered and then the door gave way.

Penny and her companion retreated against the wall.

"So you thought you'd help her escape!" Brunner sneered, confronting the boy. "I thought I'd find you here. But you'll pay for your treachery, Jimmie Davis!"

He turned to Molberg, tersely ordering him to tie the arms of the prisoners.

As the man caught her by the wrist, Penny struggled furiously. Jimmie was too battered from his recent encounter to put up a fight. He recognized the futility of struggling against impossible odds.

"What shall we do with 'em now?" Molberg asked gruffly when he had succeeded in overpowering Penny. "This girl is a little wildcat if there ever was one!"

"We'll take them along with us," Brunner ordered tersely. "The important thing is to get away from here while the getting is good. We can decide the fate of these two later on."

Penny and her companion were forced to walk into the main room of the sawmill. They saw that everything was in readiness for a hurried departure. The truck had been reloaded and stood waiting by the door.

"Get in!" Molberg commanded sharply, pushing Penny toward the rear of the van.

"How can I with my hands tied?" she demanded indignantly. "Unfasten the cords."

Instead, Molberg lifted her off her feet, dropping her unceremoniously among the neat stacks of car wheels with which the truck was filled. Even less gently, Jimmie Davis was tossed in beside her.

Then the back end of the van was dropped down and the canvas cover thrown over it. Penny and her companion were enveloped in darkness.

"Where are they taking us?" she asked in a whisper.

"Probably to a hideout in another state," Jimmie informed. "Our jig is up unless we can escape."

"We may have a chance after the truck starts."

"I doubt it," the boy returned gloomily. "We'll be watched every second. If we make a move, they'll shoot."

Penny relapsed into a moody silence. It was hot and unpleasant in the covered truck. Her arms hurt where the cords cut deeply into the flesh. Her

head had begun to ache and she could think of no way to escape.

Presently the truck began to move. From the manner in which it bumped about, Penny knew they were traveling down the rough side road to the main highway. Once there the van would be absorbed in the general stream of traffic.

"I guess Brunner was right when he called me yellow," Jimmie presently said in a low tone. "I've betrayed my father, my sister and my friends. I wanted to go straight, but Brunner had me in a strangle hold."

"How do you mean?" Penny asked.

"He threatened to tell my father the truth. I'd have quit working for him long ago if I hadn't been such a coward."

"Just what did you do for Brunner, Jimmie?"

"I drove the truck. At first I thought it was a legitimate job. When I discovered that I was hauling stolen tires I wanted to quit.

"Brunner wouldn't let you?"

"No, he made me keep on. You see I was heavily in debt—Father didn't know that either. I

needed the money the job brought in. I kept getting in deeper and deeper. I hated to disgrace my father and my sister."

"I can understand that, Jimmie."

"I didn't treat you right either, Miss Nichols. I lied to you about why the police were after me."

"I suspected that," Penny acknowledged.

"I was driving a truck of stolen wheels to Chicago when I had a blow-out," the boy went on. "A policeman came over to investigate. I ducked out and hid in your garage."

"Why didn't you come to talk with my father as you promised, Jimmie?"

"I knew he had been assigned to catch the auto accessory thieves. I couldn't afford to take any chance."

Before Penny could reply there came a screech of brakes as the truck abruptly stopped. She was flung hard against the end-gate.

"Halt!" a voice rang out. "Halt or we'll fire!"

CHAPTER XX

Penny's Triumph

WITH a thrill of joy, Penny recognized her father's voice. In some manner he had traced her telephone call and had brought help!

Two shots rang out, to be followed in quick succession by others from the driver's seat of the truck.

Then silence.

Penny, huddling against the wall of the dark van, decided to take a chance. She screamed loudly for help.

A moment later the canvas cover was jerked from the rear of the truck. Mr. Nichols' face loomed up behind the electric lantern which he carried.

"Penny! Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit, Dad. But I'm tied up."

"I'll have you out in a jiffy. Courage!"

Mr. Nichols leaped nimbly upon the truck, and

with his pocket knife severed the cords which held her arms.

"What happened?" Penny questioned eagerly. "I heard the shots."

"The battle didn't amount to much. We outnumbered them two to one. Molberg was wounded in the leg when he leaped off the truck and took to the fields."

"And Brunner?"

"He's handcuffed to one of the officers now."

"How did you know where to come?" Penny questioned. "I was overpowered before I could give you directions."

"I suspected that. In fact, I was worried sick for fear I wouldn't get to you in time. Your note gave me a faint clue. Then I traced the telephone call to the Somm Center exchange so I knew you were somewhere in this vicinity. Yesterday we received an anonymous tip that an abandoned sawmill near here would bear investigation. Putting two and two together I thought perhaps the gangsters might be captured there."

"But you came so quickly."

"By plane to Somm Center," Mr. Nichols smiled. "The police were waiting for me at the field with automobiles. We lost no time in bottling up all the roads approaching the old sawmill."

During the hurried conversation, Jimmie Davis had remained quiet. Now Mr. Nichols bent over him.

"Who is this boy, Penny?"

"It's all right, Dad. Set him free. I'll explain everything."

The detective cut the bonds and Jimmie stepped down from the truck.

"Hold on there," a policeman intervened, taking the boy by the arm. "You're wanted at headquarters."

Jimmie offered no resistance. Handcuffs were slipped over his wrists.

"Oh, Dad, don't let them do that!" Penny pleaded. "He isn't really a criminal."

"Who is this boy, Penny?" the detective asked again.

"Jimmie Davis alias Jerry Barrows."

"Davis! Not Jerome Davis' son!"

"Yes, he is."

"Now I begin to understand a few things which weren't clear to me before. Why our raid failed, for instance."

"I don't believe Jerome Davis is implicated with the gang," Penny insisted. "Can't you let this boy go free? If it becomes generally known that he is the son of a policeman it will do so much harm."

"We can't favor him on that account, Penny."

"I realize that, but he's innocent. At least his worst crime was to drive the truck which contained the stolen tires. He only did that because Brunner threatened him."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, I am. I overheard Brunner quarreling with him."

Penny then began a rapid account of all that she had witnessed at the old sawmill. Several of the policemen gathered near to hear the story. Brunner, handcuffed to an officer, listened intently to her words.

"It's all a lie," he interrupted. "This Davis boy is the son of an old friend of mine. Because I

thought so much of his father I came here tonight to try to save the boy from his own folly. I pleaded with him to give up his career of crime——"

"And why were you found in the company of Rap Molberg?" Mr. Nichols questioned severely.

"I was trying to think of some way——"

"Never mind," the detective cut him short. "You can explain it to the judge."

While Brunner, Molberg and the men who had been captured with them were being loaded into police cars, an automobile was observed coming toward the lane which led to the sawmill.

"Block the road," Mr. Nichols ordered. "It may be more of the gang."

A police car was turned crosswise in the highway. The oncoming automobile stopped just in time to avoid a crash. Officers instantly surrounded the car.

Penny, crowding near recognized the driver as Jerome Davis. Beside him crouched his daughter, Betty.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mr. Davis demanded.

His eyes swept the group and came to rest upon his own son who was in the custody of an officer.

"Jimmie!" he exclaimed. His shoulders sagged; his hands fell from the steering wheel. "I see I am too late," he murmured.

Betty sprang from the car and ran to her brother.

"Oh, Jimmie, how could you do it?" she cried brokenly. "How could you?"

Penny slipped her arm about the weeping girl and led her away.

"Why did you come here tonight, Betty?" she asked gently.

"We came because we knew Jimmie was in danger. We thought we might get here ahead of the police and save him from arrest."

"Then your father knows the truth?"

"Yes, he's suspected for some weeks that Jimmie was implicated with the dreadful Molberg gang. Tonight he forced me to acknowledge it."

"But how did you know, Betty?"

"Once I saw Jimmie with Rap Molberg at the Blind Pig. I realized too that my brother was deeply in debt. I made him tell me everything."

"No wonder you were worried," Penny said sympathetically.

"I didn't know what to do," Betty went on nervously. "I was afraid to tell Father the truth because I thought it would just about kill him. He had pledged himself to the task of tracing down the Molberg gang."

"And of course, if Jimmie's name were linked in any way with the automobile thefts, it would have cost your father his position."

"Yes, I was afraid too that Father would insist upon turning Jimmie over to the police. He is so upright and honest. He detests a criminal."

"How did your father learn the truth, Betty?"

"He guessed it but at first said nothing to me."

"How long has he known?"

"Since the night of the raid. At least that was when he first became suspicious. He thought Jimmie had tipped off the Molberg gang that their hideouts were to be raided."

"But how did Jimmie learn that?"

"Father unintentionally mentioned it at the breakfast table."

"It was immediately after the raid that Mr. Davis seemed to lose interest in the case," Penny said musingly.

"Yes, he was bewildered by the turn of events. I didn't know it until tonight, but he quietly set about watching Jimmie. In a short while he had learned the truth."

"And how did you know that Jimmie would be here tonight?" Penny questioned.

"He told me," Betty admitted. "For weeks I have pleaded with him to give up this dreadful life he has been leading. He promised me he would. But he said there was a special reason why he must drive the truck one more time."

"That was because the leader of the gang had threatened to tell Mr. Davis," Penny commented.

"Anyway, tonight Father forced me to admit everything. When he learned that Jimmie would be at the old sawmill, he determined to come here and try to save him from his own folly. Oh, Miss Nichols, do you think they'll keep Jimmie in jail?"

"Not if I can prevent it," Penny returned

firmly. "Come on, I want you to repeat to Father what you've just told me."

The girls found Mr. Nichols and a group of policemen talking with Jerome Davis. The latter looked completely discouraged.

"I'm not asking you to believe my story or to let Jimmie go free," he said quietly. "My son has broken the law and he must be punished the same as any other offender. Of course I shall resign my position on the force immediately."

"That may not be necessary," Mr. Nichols told him kindly. "In my opinion you've already proven that you had no hand in the affair."

"It was my fault that the raid failed," the policeman accused himself. He turned to his son. "Jimmie, you were the one who tipped off the gang that it was to be staged?"

"Yes, Father," the boy admitted. "I dropped it out before I thought. I didn't mean to do it."

"I take all the blame," Jerome Davis said quietly. "I should never have mentioned the affair at home."

He moved over to his son, placing his hand upon

his shoulder for an instant. Then he turned sternly back to the group of officers.

"Do your duty, men," he directed.

No one moved.

"It isn't right to arrest this boy," Penny declared. "He was trying to go straight and he ought to have a chance."

"He'll get it too!" Mr. Nichols added. "With you as a witness in his favor, Penny, I'm confident he'll be released."

Brunner, Molberg and other members of the captured gang were loaded into police cars and taken back to Belton City. Although technically under custody, Jimmie Davis rode with Mr. Nichols and was not handcuffed.

Betty and her father took Penny home since Mr. Nichols found it necessary to go to the police station.

"I can't thank you enough for all you've done," Betty said gratefully as Penny alighted at her own doorstep. "If Jimmie does go free, it will be entirely through your efforts and your father's."

"I think everything will come out right," Penny

told her encouragingly. "If there's any news I'll let you know the first thing in the morning."

As the car drove away, Mrs. Gallup rushed out of the house to embrace the girl.

"Penny, what has happened?" she cried. "Your clothes are dirty and mussed. You're a sight!"

"I don't doubt it," Penny laughed. "I've had a wild night."

"I didn't get home until an hour ago," Mrs. Gallup explained. "When I found you weren't here I was frantic. I was afraid you might have been kidnapped again."

"Rap Molberg won't trouble me after this, Mrs. Gallup. He's spending the night in jail."

She then gave a glowing account of the capture at the Somm Center sawmill. The details left the housekeeper dumbfounded.

"Penny Nichols, it's plain to see you're going to take after your father," she sighed. "One detective in the family is bad enough."

"It was the most exciting experience of my life!" Penny declared, her eyes gleaming. "I suppose I shall never have another like it."

In such a prediction, she was entirely mistaken. Without the power to look into the future she could not know that an adventure of far different character, though even more thrilling, awaited her. *The Mystery of the Lost Key,* the second volume in the Penny Nichols series, relates her escapades at Raven Ridge.

Events had moved with such rapidity that until Mrs. Gallup brought a tray of steaming food from the kitchen and set it before her, Penny had not realized how very hungry she was. She had just finished the supper when Mr. Nichols came home.

"What news?" Penny asked eagerly.

"Brunner and Molberg are both behind bars where they belong," her father reported. "Brunner is trying to raise bail and may get out by morning."

"Oh, then he may escape the law after all."

"No danger of that, Penny. He'll be watched from the instant he leaves the jail and kept in sight until he appears for trial."

"Do you think he will be convicted?"

"I feel sure of it. If you testify against him he

hasn't a chance. Will you mind going to court?"

"I'd love it!" Penny returned instantly. "Nothing would give me greater satisfaction than to serve as a witness against both of those men."

"Brunner was the real brains behind the gang," Mr. Nichols went on. "He had everyone fooled, including myself. You did a fine piece of work tonight, my dear."

Penny flushed at the praise.

"If it hadn't been for your arrival at the critical moment, all my information would have been worthless. I guess I was very foolhardy."

"Perhaps you were, a trifle," the detective smiled. "But an investigator must take certain chances. Not that I'd want you to do the same thing again," he added hastily.

"You didn't tell me what the police did about Jimmie Davis," Penny reminded him. "I hope he wasn't sent to jail too."

"No, he's been placed in the custody of his father for a year. If he straightens up and doesn't violate his parole, nothing more will ever be said regarding his part in the affair."

"Oh, I'm so glad! I knew you'd arrange it that way."

"It wasn't entirely due to my efforts," the detective insisted. "The boy really isn't bad at heart. The way he came to your rescue proved that."

"This will mean so much to Betty and her father," Penny declared happily. Her face clouded. "I suppose nothing can save Mr. Davis' position on the force?"

"Quite the contrary," Mr. Nichols smiled. "It is already arranged that he shall keep his job."

"But the newspaper publicity?"

"There will be none. At least, not regarding Mr. Davis and his son."

It was long after midnight when Penny went to bed. She was so tired and worn that she did not awaken until Mrs. Gallup rapped several times upon her door.

"What time is it?" Penny inquired drowsily.

"Nearly noon," the housekeeper reported. "I shouldn't have awakened you, only the telephone has been ringing all morning and the yard is cluttered with newspaper men."

"I'll be right down," Penny laughed, springing out of bed.

It was a new experience for her to find herself occupying the limelight. She enjoyed talking with the reporters but took care to reveal nothing which involved either Mr. Davis or his son. The morning papers played up the story of the capture, and Penny's photograph, dug up from the morgue, appeared upon the front page.

She was studying it with mingled feelings of pleasure and disappointment when Susan Altman burst in upon her.

"Congratulations!" she beamed. "I see by the morning paper that you are famous!"

"Did you ever see such a horrible picture?" Penny complained. "It's three years old at least. Why, I look positively juvenile. Where the editor found it I don't know."

"You should worry about such a trifle as that!" Susan scoffed. "Tell me the entire story."

"There's nothing to report except what's in the paper," Penny replied.

Although she longed to relate the part which

Jimmie had played, she wisely refrained from mentioning his name. If he were to have his opportunity to begin life anew, the past must be forgotten.

For days Penny found herself besieged by friends and acquaintances who were eager to learn all the details of her adventure. When she walked downtown she was gazed upon with awe and admiration.

At the trial of Rap Molberg and George Brunner, she appeared as the state's star witness. The garage owner, well fortified with dishonestly acquired money, had employed one of the best criminal lawyers in the state to defend him. Penny was put through a severe test when she took the stand, but although nervous, she answered all questions calmly and clearly. Her testimony was largely responsible for the conviction of both Rap Molberg and Brunner. The two were ordered confined to the state penitentiary for a long term of years.

Mr. Nichols was jubilant at the result of the trial.

"This definitely clears up the case," he declared.

"And I think it calls for a big celebration."

The victory event took the form of a gala dinner at Belton City's leading hotel. Penny invited Susan and many of her high school friends. In addition, policemen, detectives and all persons who had aided in the capture of the thieves, were present.

"We will have no speeches," Mr. Nichols had promised. "Only good food and plenty of fun."

Penny therefore was surprised when her father, who occupied the chair at the head of the table, arose and faced the expectant group.

"I don't mean to break my promise about speech making," he smiled. "For that reason, without any formality, I shall present to my daughter, Penny, this token of merit from the officials of the Reliance Insurance Company for her splendid work in connection with the Molberg case."

Penny gasped as her father held up a tiny bejeweled wrist watch and placed it in her hand. It was the daintiest and most exquisite timepiece she had ever seen.

"Oh, isn't it wonderful," chorused a bevy of friends as they gathered about.

"It's the nicest thing that ever happened to me," Penny declared. "I can't begin to say how grateful I am."

"Aren't you going to look at the inscription?" her father inquired, his eyes twinkling.

In surprise she glanced down at the case. Her face flushed.

"Read it aloud!" commanded her friends.

Penny was too confused to obey. For engraved on the watch case, in the tiniest of letters, were the words:

"TO PENNY NICHOLS
FOR DISTINGUISHED SERVICES
AS AN AGENT OF JUSTICE."

THE END

PENNY NICHOLS FINDS A CLUE

CLARK

GOLDSMITH